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THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy & Science Fiction

AUGUST

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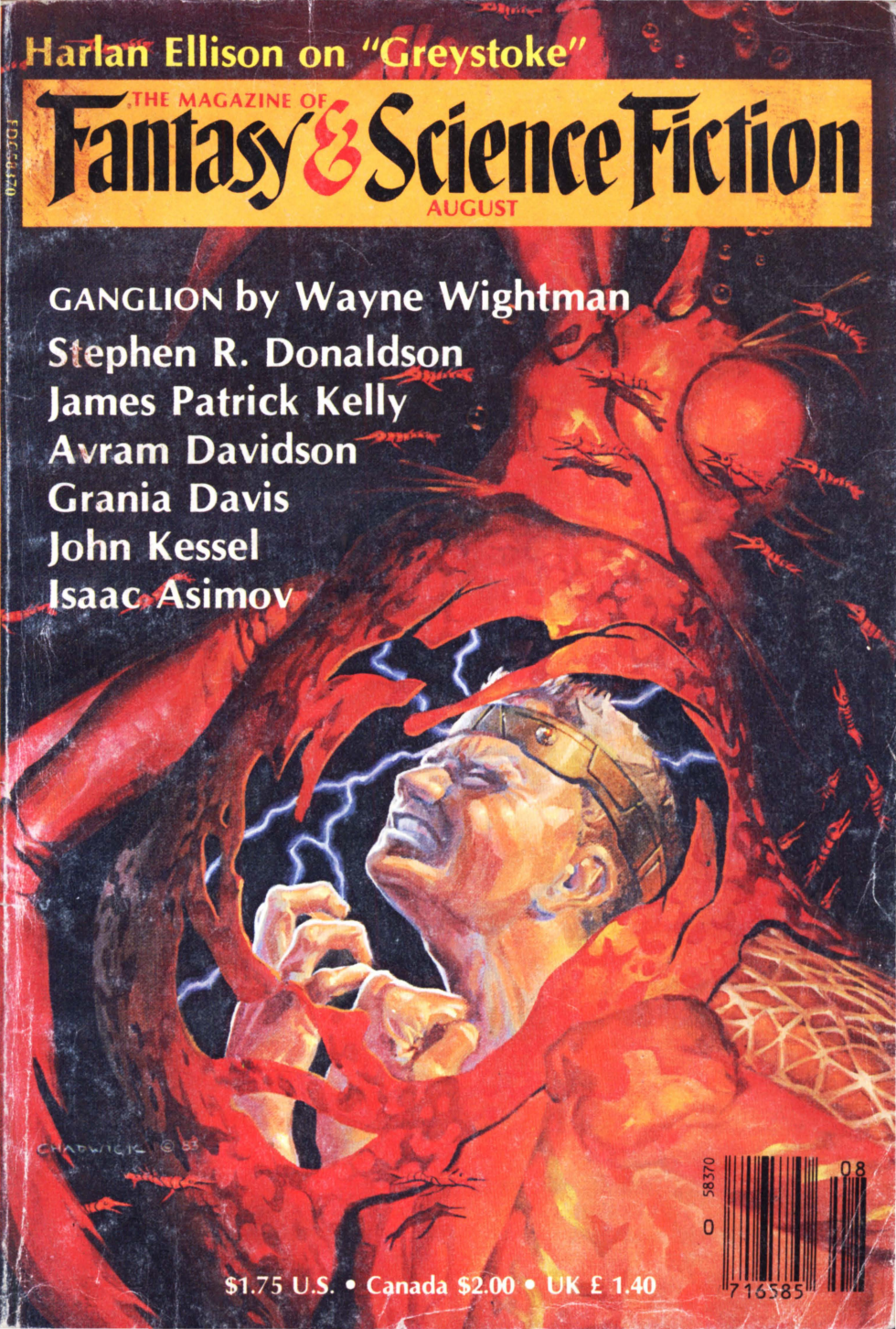
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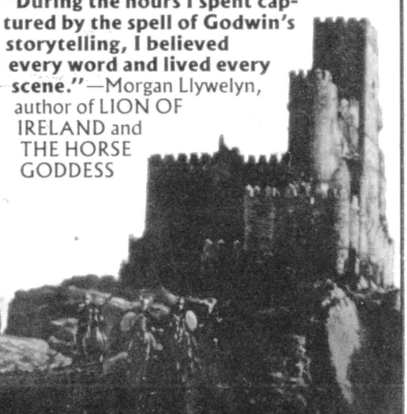
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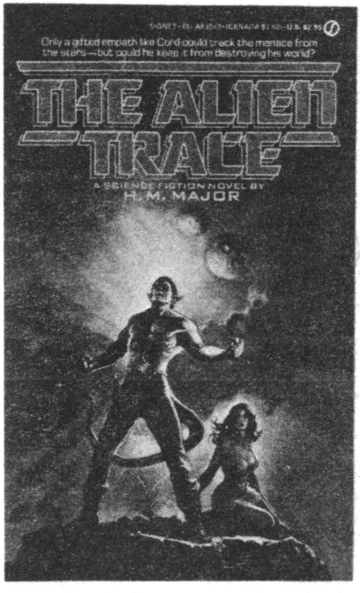
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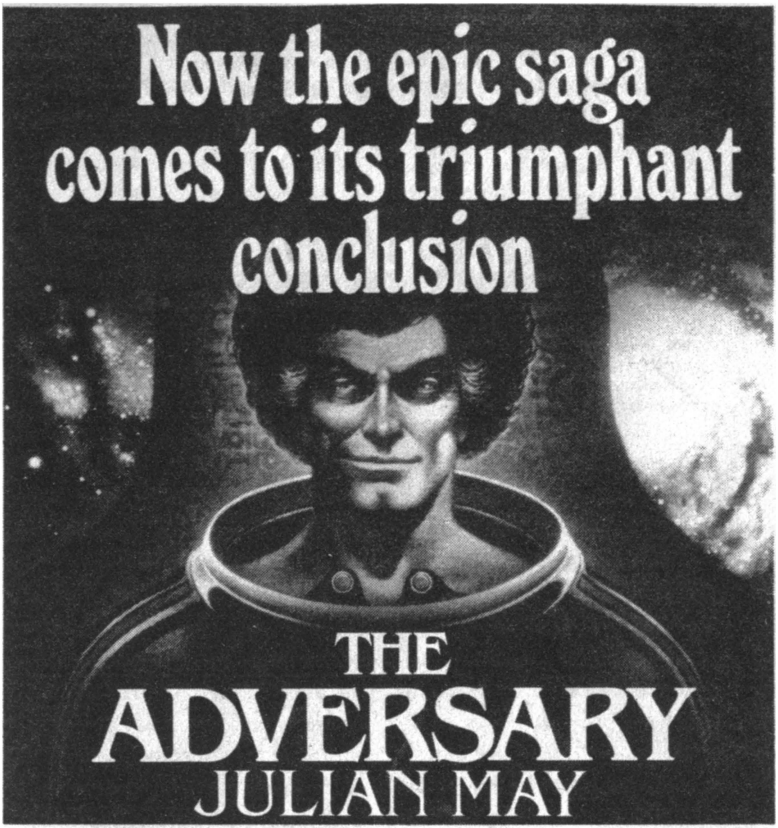
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Ganglion

BY
WAYNE WIGHTMAN

He had just asked his wife what she was going to do with her day when she started to creep. She slinked out of her chair and left the kitchen and began creeping around the living room, walking on tiptoes, with a suspicious look on her face. She crept from room to room on her tiptoes with her back nearly parallel to the floor. Her morning hair hung around her face in wads and her lips were parted and colorless.

Evven Blisson finished his coffee as he watched his wife several times in and out of the kitchen. She had been doing this, off and on, for over a month now, but he was not alarmed by it — her particular pseudopsychosis was moderately common on the probe station. With the station hovering a dozen light-years over the galactic hub, the explanation given was that a combination of magnetic fields, radiation, and stress caused some of the station residents to exhibit aberrant behavior.

Evven was just as glad that his wife had begun to creep — another two or three minutes and they would have been fighting about sex or money or the arrangement of furniture. They no longer loved each other, but they were contracted to one another for another eighteen months.

He put his coffee cup in the cleaner and stepped into the living room: oblivious to him, Linda was creeping behind the floor lamp. He went into his study and quietly closed the door. It was 7:15 A.M. and he had a full hour before he had to leave for work at the Outputs.

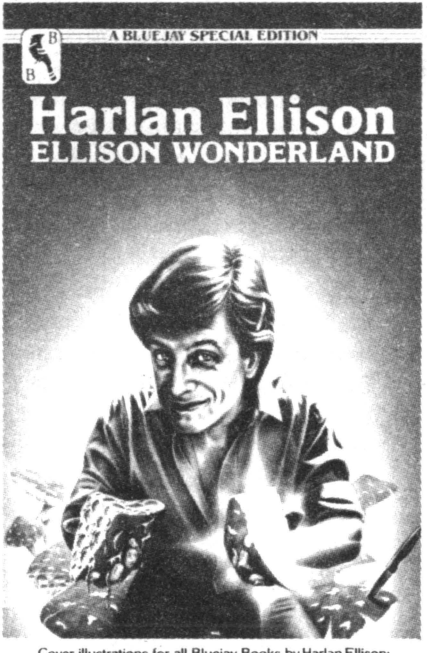
He turned on the computer and quickly typed in several access codes and slipped the pickup around his head and reclined in the formchair.

There it was. It all came back: the

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trees, the pond, the rolling hills, and the puff-clouded sky. He would work on the ground now, filling in the grass, a few rocks, maybe a few bushes. And it was all so quiet, so very quiet, and he was alone. He liked that. In his daily work, he inhabited the minds of aliens — one less-than-human species after another, day after day; the work was less private than being naked in a crowded room. Everyone had access to the playback, where whatever one thought was understood. But in this place, he was alone; he could be himself. He often felt surprise at how little he required for happiness. Just a little quiet. Just a little place where he wouldn't be bothered.

If Linda knew the truth, that he was constructing his own imaginary world on a mem-crystal, she would take it as the deepest kind of rejection, and it would not be jealousy that she would feel — it would be vengeance. And with all the other arguments and disagreements, that would be something he figured he could do without.

He built the grass very carefully. He clumped it in one place around an arrangement of rocks and then spread it densely up the hills and under the groves of trees. He adjusted the color and the focus till it seemed indistinguishable from reality, and then he fixed it permanently into the landscape. He drew back and took a long view of it — the grass was perfect.

It was too perfect; it needed a few weeds. He began to design one.

The illusion evaporated and he found himself looking at Linda's face.

"What the hell is this?" She was apparently back to normal. The tone of her question was not polite. "What are you doing in here this early?" She was holding the headband in her fingers and twirling it. The silver pickups flashed. "Let me guess," she said. "You've got some old girlfriend on the cube and you've been balling your brains out."

Without waiting for an answer, she slipped on the headband. She was still wearing her robe. It was open partway down to her waist, and he could see her pointed breasts moving around as she raised and lowered her arms. "Orgies?" she asked with a smile. "I can't wait to see how disappointed I have to be with you." She touched the computer keyboard, and for a quarter of a minute her eyes took on a glazed look. She pulled off the headband. "This piddly-ass setting is what you've been spending all your time in here with?"

"I need some peace and quiet once in a while."

"You need some peace and quiet." She threw the headband into his lap. "What do you think I have plenty of all day? Do you want to guess?"

"No, I don't want to guess."

"I have peace and quiet all day. This goddamned station is the quietest and most peaceful place man ever created."

Evven looked at his hands. His fin-

gertips pressed against each other; they were white.

"Half the people are asleep at any given time, and the other half are working or zerked out. This place gives me the creeps. There hasn't been a party in six months."

"Sorry."

"Sorry? You're sorry? Ahhh." She leaned toward him, talking at him. He stared at her breasts without seeing them. "I thought I married a celebrity," she said. "I thought that going to the research station over the hub of the galaxy would be exciting." She drew back and folded her arms. "So the sky is full of stars. Big goddamned thrill."

"I thought you knew." His knuckles were white.

"The wife of Psychonaut Evven Blisson," she said quietly, pensively. "I used to be proud of that. I told people. But when the word came out that you psychos were only decoration, that the machines could do the job just as well without you — I could've just died."

"How do you think I felt? Why do we have to go over this again?"

She was waving her arms. "The masses needed heroes. And you were the manufactured hero." She glowered at him. "I need a drink." She paused. "But I think I'll go out and get laid instead."

"Fine."

"Evven," she said calmly, "you are the most peaceful and quiet son of a bitch I have ever known. You really don't care, do you."

"I care." But he didn't care much anymore. He had cared a lot at the beginning, but he did not care so much now. The less he cared, the less it hurt. "I'm sorry you're disappointed about my work. I didn't know we were unnecessary. I thought I was doing the job I was paid for." He looked at the clock on the computer. "I have to get to work."

"What for?" she asked, tossing out a hand. "Why do they need you now if they didn't need you before?"

"United Tarassis can't admit it was wrong. They've given us a little control over the probes."

She was staring at him again. "I married a celebrity and ended up with this. Well, I guess it proves God exists. I married you for the wrong reasons, and I'm sure as hell being punished for it." She turned and left the study.

Evven hurried out of their quarters and was in the tube in less than two minutes. Drifting down to a lower level, he saw one of his co-workers.

"Morning, Ev," the man said.

"Morning," Evven answered glumly.

"Another day, another dolor." His eyebrows twitched.

"What've you got going?"

"Some deep-sea slugs in the nineteenth sector. They have some weird mathematical system based on dreams. No manipulative abilities. Boring as hell."

Evven flinched at the word.

"How's Linda?"

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"All right." Evven shrugged. "She got zerked out about a month ago."

"What form did it take?"

"She kind of creeps around the condo for a while, then when she comes out of it, she doesn't remember anything. Fairly typical case, from what I hear. She'll never admit she got zerked, though."

The man nodded thoughtfully. "They're like that." He moved closer to Evven as they drifted further down. "I don't think it's magnetic fields or radiation," he said confidentially. "I think there's some impurity in our food or in the air, that's what I think. And I'm not alone in that."

Evven nodded as noncommitally as he could. It was a subject he didn't want to think about.

"What're you working on these days?" the man asked in his normal voice.

"New assignment today," Evven said. "It could be anything."

Bugs," Supervisor Braxton said. He rapped Evven on the chest with the back of his hand. "Today you get bugs. Come on, Evven, act like you're breathing."

"Yes, sir."

Braxton shook his finger in Evven's face. "I want to see some improvement in your attitude. I want to see some enthusiasm from you."

"I'll try, sir."

Supervisor Braxton checked his list. "You're on Output 906. Got that? 906."

"Yes, sir."

"Thirty-seventh sector, life-form type RB-3." He looked up and grinned. His face was broad and flat and his eyebrows were swaths of black across his forehead. "Big fat bugs. Low intelligence, so it should be fairly easy for you today. As far as we know, they're not big on communication. Think you can be a convincing bug, Evven?"

"Yes, sir. What do I look for, sir?"

Braxton glanced at his list again. "We think they might have some technology. Our remote orbiter picked up some anomalous radiation, and about two days ago, one of your fellow psychos got flashed while he was doing a preliminary."

"How's he doing?"

Braxton grinned again. His eyebrows lowered. "Terminal fuckup. We shot him into the core yesterday."

Evven swallowed. "Can I look at his tape before I hook in?" This would be the first time he had ever followed anyone who'd got flashed. He didn't clearly remember the procedure. He noticed that Braxton had a piece of lint sticking to one of his massive eyebrows. He involuntarily kept staring at it.

"Won't do you any good to look at it — we've been over it half a dozen times. A complete mystery. He had the host walking along, and then — *papf* — another bug got him by the back of the neck and cinched him. No warning

at all — the host was a dead mother. There was a minor malfunction in the resource retrieval module." Braxton jerked his head a little to one side. "Zip city. We gave him a nice send-off. Didn't you get the invitation?"

Linda had probably thrown it away. "I'd like to look at the tape, anyway," Evven said.

"You got it. 906. It'll be there when you get there. In the meantime, let's see some enthusiasm." Braxton winked, as though they shared some secret. When he winked, the piece of lint dropped off.

Evven walked back to the central axis of the station and stepped into the tube once more. His Output was seven levels down. As he dropped, he looked at the slick cryoplast wall. He wondered what had gone wrong that he had ended up like this. Nothing seemed to go well anymore. Braxton had it in for him for some unknown reason. And he felt partially responsible for how Linda felt; they had both married each other for the wrong reasons. He had been lonely and Linda had been there, easy to laugh, easy to please.

Live and learn, he thought. It was a tough way to live.

He stepped out of the tube into the 900's. On both sides of the corridor, in shallow niches, there were Output consoles, the monitoring readouts, the biometric control units, and the inevitably tangled headband with the silver pickups. Most of the units were occupied, the psychonauts wired up like mem-cubes, tranced out, surrounded by jittering level indicators. And on a thousand different worlds around the galactic hub, alien life-forms found their minds inhabited by another consciousness. Sometimes they did not find it a pleasant experience, and sometimes they died. If they died suddenly, there was a problem of "coherent resource reassembly," and the psychonaut, if he survived at all, awakened with a severely deranged personality.

A year earlier, Evven had been proud to be a psychonaut. But with the news releases telling them that they were unnecessary, the work no longer seemed heroic; it only seemed dangerous. Some people did not even call them psychonauts; they called them parasites.

Evven strolled unhurriedly past the Outputs to 906. At 905, getting set up and ready to hook in, he recognized someone he had gone to school with. Jefferson? Jerrison?

The man saw him and held out his hand. "Jamison," he said. "Class of '96."

Evven shook his hand and identified himself.

"How long have you been psyching?" Jamison asked. He was one of those people with blond hair and brown eyebrows. He had a narrow face and fat lips. "I'm finishing up my fourth month." He spoke animatedly, moving the headband in his fingers and bobbling one foot. "I've got a JL-2 today. How about yourself?" He glanced

at the adjacent Output. "They left a tape here for you a few minutes ago. You must be following someone else's work."

"He got flashed," Evven said. Jamison was making him tired with his enthusiasm. Besides, Evven needed to concentrate on what he was doing; he didn't want to get thrown into the core like his predecessor. "I'm just finishing what he started." Evven began setting up the codes and fail-safes.

He remembered when he had graduated from Polypsych University. He had been as lively as Jamison. Living in the minds of others, trying to figure out what you were seeing and what its significance was, trying to comprehend alien logic, trying to determine the nature of alien culture and technology were all exhausting now. There didn't seem to be any point to it. Like talking to Linda. The information was filed away to collect dust. The whole operation was publicity for United Tarassis.

"... flashed about two months ago," Jamison was saying as he gestured with his hands and leaned forward in his formchair. "He was O.K. in a few weeks, though. There's been a lot of talk, too, about defective or low-grade replacement components that cause damage to alien brains. But that happens once in a while, as I see it. It's just one of the hidden expenses. You know what I mean?"

Evven had already put the tape in and slipped on the headband. He activated the playback without answering Jamison. There was the momentary buzz between the ears, and then the images began to take shape. He was then looking at an alien world through the eyes of a lumbering insect.

The previous operator, the one who had got flashed, was inside the mind of a thirty- to forty kilogram land-based insect. Through the perceptions of the insect and the flashed psychonaut, Evven saw half a dozen of the leggy things — soft-bodied, brownish, with a thorax of interlocking segments. The ground was rocky and patched with dead vegetation, and everything looked vague in the murky atmosphere. At some distance, another animal, a shaggy crawling thing, squirmed listlessly toward a pile of rocks.

Without preliminaries, Evven sensed a tickling sensation at the back of the insect's head — and the tape was over. The insect's death and the psychonaut's panic had fortunately been edited out. It seemed to Evven that the insect who had been selected by the psychonaut to be the recipient of his consciousness had probably been targeted for extermination sometime before he had entered his mind. Bad luck.

"You going for the real thing now?" Jamison asked. He had his headband resting around his neck. A small screen on his console showed a half-completed dot game he had been amusing himself with. "How dangerous d'you think it'll be?"

"Beats me," Evven said as he entered the various access codes and waited for clearance.

"Are you mad about something?" Jamison asked. "Are you mad at me?"

Evven stopped his hand over the keyboard. He looked at Jamison. "I'm not mad at you, but you shouldn't ask me what I'm mad about. There are a whole lot of things I'd like to get off my chest, see, and if I start talking about one of them, like my wife, if I start talking about my wife, say, I might get real pissed off and start telling you what I'd like to tell her, like, when we get back to the real world, I'm going to drop her so fast it'll stun legal minds, and if I get going on that one, sooner or later I'll get around to talking about this job—" (He could feel adrenaline cascading down his spine.) "—and if I start talking about all this crap, I could get very ugly. Understand?"

"Yes, sir." For once, Jamison was holding still.

"So don't ask me what I'm mad about. Ask me about the weather."

"Yes, sir."

Evven put in the last set of numbers. "What have you been hearing about defective components? — you said you'd heard some talk."

"Just, sir, that in the civilian world there's a lot of talk lately about how our program kills a lot of alien hosts because we're using low-grade replacement parts."

Several of Evven's hosts had checked out while he was in them — but their deaths hadn't been so quick that there had been any retrieval difficulties. He thought that he had just had a run of bad luck. Maybe not.

He put the headband on. Everything was set.

"When you come back, sir," Jamison was saying, "I have this mem-cube here—" He pointed to a plastic bag under his Output. "It's a good one. Really hot action. You could borrow it for a while," he said confidentially.

Evven wasn't even paying him much attention. "See you later, Jamison."

He depressed the SEND button. There was again the momentary buzz between the ears, and again he was inside one of the slow-moving insects. He felt the alien mind resist his presence in a skittery, confused way. A twittering panic set in, but Evven froze its physical body so the fear might not be so evident to the other three insects that were nearby. Then he forced it to move its head enough to look behind and to the sides to make sure there would no repetition of what had happened to the other operator.

The insect and its three kin had been walking toward a green-glazed pond. The thick atmosphere dimmed the outline of the water and made everything look fuzzy. Evven forced his host to continue down the gradual slope to the water. On the horizon, fifty or sixty meters away, he noted one of the shaggy crawling things. It moved clumsily.

As he and the others neared the

slicked water, they drew closer together until, at the edge of the pond, Evven sensed them brushing their stiff legs against his abdomen. Then they took him in their front legs, and six crisp-edged hooks lifted him up over the water's edge and dropped him.

It was oily and astringent, and it slopped over his head and turned everything red-edged and blurry.. He let the cowering insect mind have a little more free rein, so it could effectively manipulate its legs and climb out of the mucky pond. The insect struggled wildy, and the muddy bottom closed around its knee-joints.

"Don't panic," Evven told himself. Hosts had died on him before, and the rescue units had automatically kicked in — always plenty of time, always just as they should ... he would be able to go back to his condo that afternoon, have dinner, argue with Linda.... The host sank deeper, and just a meter away, the other three insects watched impassively while his struggles brought the stinging viscous fluid up around his segmented thorax. The stuff seeped between the segments and burned like melted lead.

Evven screamed inside the insect's mind — and the thing reared its head and made a shuddering, chirping sound and sank deeper. The liquid flowed into his neck joint. Everything was fire. Evven screamed as his eyes were scorched out of his head, as his stomach burst into flame, as his brain smoldered. Evven screamed and felt himself die.

"... and then you stood up and kind of arched your back," Jamison was saying, "and then you made this squeaking noise. I don't know how you did it." He made circular motions with one hand. "I tried making a noise like that when I got back to my condo that afternoon, but I couldn't do it. And then all this white stuff came out of your mouth." He scooted his chair closer to Evven's bed and stared into his face. "No one wants to work at 906 anymore, and d'you know why? They *fixed* it. And I saw the parts they were putting in. Real cheap crap. Everyone's jockeying to get an Output that hasn't had any repairs done on it. They're the safest. Some of us think somebody's buying the cheap stuff and taking home the difference. And guys like you and me get dicked for it. Actually, *you* get dicked for it. I've been getting good Outputs." Jamison paused. "You look like spap. How do you feel?"

Evven felt like an evolutionary error. The oxygen tent that surrounded him made everything look crinkly. Without moving his head, he could count five tubes that hooked into his legs. He would have preferred to be unconscious.

Jamison tired of waiting for an answer to his question. "Well, Supervisor Braxton is outside waiting." He rolled his shoulders, one at a time. He chuckled. "That's why I've stayed and visited awhile. Oh, here." He took a mem-cube

out of his pocket. "This came for you right after you got flashed." He put it on the table by Evven's head. "No name on it to say who it's from." He stood up and ran his fingers through his hair. "See you in a few weeks," he said, lightly touching Evven's shoulder through the plastic tent. He winked heavily and left.

Braxton's flat face suddenly loomed over Evven. "Tough luck, son. Can you talk?"

Evven didn't want to talk. He wanted to stop hurting.

Braxton turned and bellowed, *"Nurse!"*

A moment later, a petite woman in white linen appeared in the doorway. Her black hair glistened. She smiled.

"I want this man to be able to talk to me," Braxton ordered.

Still smiling pleasantly, the nurse nodded. She went to the foot of the bed and minutely adjusted the flow of one of the liquids into Evven's leg.

"Can you talk now?" Braxton asked, his face hovering over Evven's.

Evven felt traces of omnipotence coursing through his blood. He nodded his head. The nurse smiled at him. He liked that.

"How are you feeling, son?" Braxton asked, waving the nurse out of the room. Her hips turned interestingly as she walked.

"I feel alive."

"Modern drugs are wonderful, aren't they? Medicine can do many things."

Evven felt a surge of hostility toward Braxton; he wondered if the nurse had overadjusted the flow. "Why are you here? What do you want?"

"I just want your goodwill," Braxton said innocently. "I came to see if you were O.K."

"Who does the maintenance on the Outputs?"

"Why?" The innocence began to fade.

"Why not? Is it classified information?"

"I'm just curious why you want to know that right after you got flashed." A flatness came into his eyes.

"Who does the maintenance?"

"Zipser-Gomax Support Industries."

Evven was going to ask who contracted ZGSI, but something was happening to Braxton. His beady eyes were riveted on the mem-cube on the bedside table. Very quickly, with jerking movements, Braxton stood up, took the cube in his fingers, turned it over and around six or seven times, moved with short twitchy steps to the opposite side of the room, picked up a comb, studied it, broke several teeth out of it, appeared to try to taste them, spat them out, quick-walked to the window and fingered the curtain sensuously, sniffed it, spun around, ran his fingertips across the surface of the thermoplast wall, turned again, and held his face only centimeters from one of the drip bottles that fed into Evven's legs.

Zerked out, Evven thought.

He watched as Braxton came out of it. He looked momentarily confused — he probably wondered why he would suddenly find himself staring into a drip bottle. He tried to gloss it over by waving his hands and saying powerfully, "In short, you have two days."

"Two days for what?"

"This is no idle threat, Evven."

"I'm afraid I missed something," Evven said.

Braxton put on his frosty look. "Don't play sick with me, son. You're going to be back at 906 in seventy-two hours, making another scum-run on that place. We know those bugs have something, and we want to know what it is." He smiled hostilely. "We might be able to use it." He pointed to the drip bottles. "You keep your valves open, son. You want to heal up fast."

"Let a machine do it. It's an easy place to get flashed."

"United Tarassis still thinks you guys can be heroes. We've gone to a lot of trouble to give you guys a little control on the probes — it's what you psychos wanted, am I wrong? We give you control and we see to it the opinion networks know about it — and we're all happy." Braxton leaned closer. "Either you're at 906 in seventy-two hours, or you get a grade-six damage report. Try living with that."

A grade-six report, Evven knew, would end his future. He would have to live in public condos, surrounded by near-vegetables.

"Look," Braxton said paternally, his eyebrows high on his forehead, "I've heard the rumors about defective parts, and there's nothing to them. My word on that. Listen, our budget has been cut all to hell ever since the news got out about how you guys were just decoration. I've been taking a lot of heat, but we do the best we can and keep the Outputs operating. Seventy-two hours, son. Get well quick."

Evven tried to sit up a little, but everything sparkled with pain. Maybe his motor centers were damaged. He wondered if he had any coordination left. Maybe he couldn't feed himself.

"Why bother with me?" Evven asked. "I'm damaged merchandise. Get yourself a fresh psycho."

Braxton looked at the bedside table. He had a sort of half-grin on his face, looking very complacent, like he knew he was going to make an Important Statement That Would Surprise Everyone. He picked up the mem-cube Jamison had left and flipped it in the air and caught it neatly. "Evven," he said, "I've always thought you were an asshole, so I don't mind telling you this. You were a smart guy when you came here. You did your work and you enjoyed it. Then you got this bad attitude. You let public opinion get to you. So here it is, short and crusty: You're in my pocket. You do what I tell you to do, or I will take whatever of yours I want and I'll ruin the rest. I want you, son, precisely because you are damaged merchandise.

If you get a terminal flash, what have I lost? Not much. If you come back with mud for brains, for me it is a Very Small Deal." He flipped and caught the cube. "You find out what those bugs have going for them, and Tarassis will be happy, I'll be happy, and you can go your own way. Refuse and I'll piss on your life. What'll it be?"

Evven stared at Braxton. Braxton grinned.

If he walked, Braxton could do a genuine number on him. A grade-six damage report was no laughing matter. Worst of all, it would put him out of reach of Braxton, and at the moment he wanted very much to reach Braxton and squeeze his neck so hard that his head would pop off like a piece of soft dough. Evven definitely wanted to stay near Braxton for a while. What else was there to do? It seemed like a bad idea to try to threaten a person who had nothing to lose — a person, even, who by all rights should have been terminally flashed.

"What'll it be?" Braxton repeated.

"Give me some time to think about it."

"You just had it."

"I'll be there."

"Good," Braxton said. For the first time, he seemed to look directly at the mem-cube he held.

"One thing," Evven said. "Did you know you zerked out about five minutes ago?"

"Bull. This cube yours?" He dropped it into the playback opening in the table.

"You were zapping around here like a low-grade on Amphidrine."

"Nice try. See you in seventy-two hours. Here." He touched the controls of the playback console. "I'll turn this on for you. What's a supervisor for, anyway? Get a nice rest and start thinking about bugs, Evven. You don't want to get flashed twice in the same week. One more scum-run and you're your own man." He waved jovially and left the room.

Beside his head, Evven could hear the humming console. At the foot of his bed, suspended in the air, sheets of light focused into the form of Linda's face. She was smiling sleepily. She seemed to be rocking. For a moment, Evven thought the mem-cube was defective.

"Guess what I'm doing, honey," she said creamily. Her head jerked irregularly. The camera was close in and he could see only her face and a few damp curls of hair. "Guess what I'm up to." She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. She rocked a little faster. "Give it a guess," she breathed.

Evven's throat turned to ice. His stomach clenched into a hard little knot. He tried to move his arm up high enough to reach the controls on top of the bedside table, but everything hurt when he moved. He tried to turn on his side. His muscles refused to obey. They hurt too much.

Linda cooed and breathed slowly. The camera began a long slow pullback. She rocked briskly. Her shoul-

ders gleamed with sweat.

Evven strained to reach the controls until he saw black curlicues in front of his eyes. He let his arm fall back. He closed his eyes and tried to blot the voice out of his mind.

Linda said, "This is what it looks like, honey. Do you like it?"

"Nurse!" Evven yelled, his eyes pressed shut. "*Nurse!*"

"It feels so good," Linda said. "And I don't even know his name. I didn't even get a good look at him. Is he handsome?"

The nurse in white linen appeared in the doorway. "Yes, Mr. Blisson?" Her pleasant smile faded to officiousness when she saw the image of Linda and her friend hovering at the foot of the bed. "You know you aren't supposed to have this kind of thing in the ward," she said, stepping over to the table.

"Turn it off, please," he said, still not looking at it.

"Was the excitement too painful?" she asked crisply, her black hair glittering in the light.

"Just turn it off."

"I suppose you see why this is prohibited here."

"Please!"

Linda was saying, "You never did *this* to me."

"The next time you need someone," the nurse said, "don't shout." She finally snapped off the mem-cube. "Use this." She reached for something that had been beside his left ear the whole time. It was a press-button. She gave him a tight smile. "Are we all set now? Ready to settle down?" She left without waiting for an answer. Her hips moved mechanically as she disappeared through the door.

Evven tried to relax, but it didn't do any good. He could only wonder why his life had turned to so much spap. This wasn't at all how he had planned things; he had planned to be a hero, a psychonaut, a person who would have to sign autographs wherever he went. Things were not working out.

The tubes running into his legs dangled like question marks over the bed. His veins throbbed and his skin hurt. Every muscle defined itself with a different shade of ache.

Why me? he wondered.

Evven Blisson swung his legs over the side of the bed and took a deep breath. It didn't feel good. He put his feet carefully on the floor and stood up.

He had gone over his life very carefully for three days. It all came down to this: He had nothing to lose. He was, therefore, free.

He struggled into his pants. He wondered if taking them off would hurt as much. His calves felt like massive bruises.

He had decided to play it by ear, with the overriding goal being to somehow repay Braxton for his special consideration. He felt a deep and abiding

need to express his feelings to Braxton. But the one thing he had to do first was get finished with the insects without being flashed again. He had an idea about that.

He walked slowly, like an old man, holding to rails whenever he could. The distance to the tube had never seemed so long. As he drifted down, finally taking all stress off his muscles and enjoying the momentary rest, he thought: What is it to check out early? Nonexistence is scary only when a person exists. Once gone, one is gone; there's no fear after that. It's just the transition that's worrisome.

He stepped out into the 900's. Most of the Outputs were occupied. Down the hall as far as the eye could see, there were psychonauts sitting at their Outputs, wired up, experiencing God-knows-what.

906. Braxton was waiting for him. He looked nervous. His hands fumbled with each other and his lips squirmed over each other before he spoke.

"Get with it," he said, nodding at the Output. He looked at Evven suspiciously. "You have something to say?" he snapped.

Evven lowered himself into the formchair. "Someone after your ass, Braxton?"

His mouth went small and tight. "Hook in. You'll be monitored ninety different ways, son, so don't try to fake anything."

Evven had never seen him look so tense. He began entering the codes. "Say," he said casually, hoping his easy manner would irritate Braxton, "what happened to Jamison? I see he isn't here."

"Jamison's a vice-president now."

"Jamison? He seemed a little squirrelly to me."

"We found him falsifying the Output monitors. He spent all day in here using the equipment to watch slave movies."

Evven checked his code book and entered several changes in the old program. "He likes slave fantasies and now he's a V.P.?"

"It would've been bad publicity."

"Ah. I see now." He finished with the codes and began waiting for clearance. He noticed that Braxton's face was drained of color, gray, and staring. Evven stared back at him.

"Go on," Braxton growled, "you can say it. Say it."

"There are a lot of things I'd like to say, Braxton, but I'm not sure which one you most want to hear."

"Hook in," he said grimly. An ugly smile twisted his lips. "Don't let those beetles snip your neck."

"Really, Braxton, you tell me what you want to hear, and I'll say it." He figured that being so helpful would get under Braxton's skin; it did.

Braxton's eyes glittered. "I know you know."

"I've been in the hospital."

"Don't dick me around, Blisson."

"Supervisor Braxton, you're a complete mystery to me. I have to start

work now." The Output was starting to chatter requests.

Braxton's eyebrows lowered till they half-covered his eyes. He turned suddenly and stalked off with his shoulders hunched up around his neck.

Evven did wonder, however, what it was that he allegedly knew. He answered the Output's questions, gave it new information and again had to wait. The insects, he had figured, were extraordinarily sensitive to any abnormal behavior — that was probably why they killed any of their kind that the psychonauts entered. They hadn't seemed big on verbal communication, so the alternative explanation was that they had spotted aberrant body language. Probably.

This time Evven was going to insert himself into one of the other animals — he would enter one of the hairy crawling things.

He slipped on the headband and gathered his concentration. The important thing was to come back unscrambled. He wanted to get his walking papers, as Braxton promised, and then he could deck him, file complaints, or plant rumors — whatever seemed like the best idea at the time. But the important thing now was to come back coherent.

He took one last deep breath and hit the SEND button. There was the buzz between the ears, and there he was, on a planet that was named only with a string of numbers, looking through the eyes of something that crawled.

The dense atomosphere made seeing poor. The thing was crawling toward a shadow between two upright boulders.

Instantaneously, Evven noted two things. The thing was not stupid, for one; and for two, it showed neither surprise nor concern at his presence. And incidentally, he noticed, it seemed to be having a lot of trouble moving itself along.

Evven probed a little deeper into the thing's psyche, pushing here and nudging there, trying to make it respond to his presence: he wanted to know what he was dealing with.

There was no reaction.

Evven probed deeper. Nothing. Not the slightest variation in effect.

Evven had been trained not to show panic, but he was feeling it. The thing should be responding to him — even blobs of sea jelly responded when touched with a probe — but there was nothing. All its concentration, which was considerable, was focused on moving, slowly and awkwardly, toward the shadow in the rocks.

He felt something moving in its consciousness, something about to move into Evven's reach.

"Wish," the thing said clearly to Evven's consciousness. "We wish. We wish you hadn't found us."

Evven felt enough panic that the automatic retrieval system should have kicked in. It didn't.

"Too bad," the thing said. It came up to the darkness in the rocks and

moved inside — inside a dark passageway with a down-slanting floor. The thing stumbled against the walls. It seemed to be hurrying, but Evven couldn't tell — it was concealing every thought and emotion from him — it was confining him to a very small psychic area. And the retrievals were inoperative.

"Don't worry," the thing said. It fell and rolled once before it righted itself.

Evven noticed that the tunnel had leveled off and was lighted. The hairy crawling thing stopped and began plucking at its skin — it was undoing something on its belly. All at once, through the thing's eye, Evven could see — and then he saw what was happening: the thing was slipping neatly out of its hair suit. It was, from what Evven could see, a weasel-like creature, something between mammal and reptile, hairless and dirty-looking. Once out of the disguise, it stretched itself several different ways and nimbly scampered down the tunnel. The floor began again to drop. The alien had no trouble seeing in the darkness. It hurried deeper underground. The tunnel turned only slightly several times.

At a dark metallic door, the thing chittered. The door opened, and inside there stretched a long brightly lit corridor, dozens of other corridors leading off it; and all along the walls, disappearing far away at the vanishing point, Evven recognized machines uncannily similar to the Outputs back at the probe station, where his physical body sat inert and entranced. These machines, however, apparently did not need operators. As the alien strolled down one hallway after another, it met and greeted with chirps and nose-touches others of its kind who seemed to be casually monitoring the devices.

"Why did you bring me here?" Evven wondered to the thing's mind, "if you didn't want us to know about this?"

"We knew sooner or later you would find out. We hoped the insects, above, and their rigid ways, would discourage you. Nonetheless."

"How much do you know about us? What do you know about us?"

The alien did not respond. It continued strolling through one corridor after another. Several minutes later, it stopped at one of the automated probe machines. "Here," it said. "Notice." It stood on its rear legs and placed its muzzle in a V-shaped indentation. With its front paw-hands, it threw several switches. "Notice," it repeated.

Evven had no choice.

A cloud entered the alien's mind — and in a microsecond, Evven saw what no one should see; he saw this, and he fell. He saw the looping lines of force reach out from this alien's caves, out far from the parent star, far from all stars to a place above the galactic core, to a place where the probe station drifted, and inside the station, into the cryoplast corridors, to a man sitting at

one of the Outputs, to the mind of Evvon Blisson; and when the loop connection was made, Evvon Blisson fell into a circling blackness that encompassed more nothing than the lens of space encompassed by the curving transmissions, and arrayed around him he saw the sparse pastel streaks of the small things he held dear; these were few. He saw, in short, how little there was of him and how little there was of anything else. It was nearly as empty as death.

The alien removed its muzzle from the machine. The loop was broken.

Still, the automatic retrieval had not activated. Evven wondered how he was still alive.

"You are defective," the alien was telling him. "See? Defective. Humans. All of them defective."

Evven tried to put two thoughts together sequentially. His mind felt as beaten as his body.

"That's why we're here. You're defective. We're defective, too. We're supposed to change that."

All Evven could bring to his thoughts was: "We're defective."

"Yes," the alien went on, "we're all defective. You've noticed? Our—" (it waved its muzzle at the probe devices.) "—equipment is new to us. We probe humans, but sometimes our adjustment is awkward."

"They get zerked," Evven said.

"Our operators are new and overeager to learn about you."

"What is this about changing us?" The hollowness was subsiding.

"We are setting up to enter humans, on a permanent basis, because they are defective, and we are defective, and we are an experiment in quadricameral consciousness."

"What experiment?" Evven was sobering fast. "What is this?"

Something akin to laughter filled the alien's mind. "It isn't our experiment. The ones who own us are doing it."

"Nobody owns us...." And he feared what he would hear next.

"Everyone is owned. You have no choice in this. You're defective. You're going to be revised. Or you're going to be exterminated. See? You have no choice in this."

"Wait a minute."

"You like being defective?"

"Maybe I'm used to it. Just wait a goddamned minute here."

"You have no choice in this. You want to work for us?"

"Work for *you*? You're going to permanently inject things like you into human minds? You're going to be parasites in humans?"

"We provide two levels of consciousness to the two you have already. See? If my people don't do this, we're exterminated, too. See? You have no choice in this. You want to work for us?"

"I wouldn't—"

Something snapped and shimmered. Braxton was looking into his face while the alien waited for an

answer — the air was effervescent. Braxton's face solidified before him. Braxton gripped the dangling headband in his white fist. Sweat ran down the sides of his face. Linda stood behind him and fawned on his beefy shoulders.

"What's the matter, son? You haven't got flashed yet. You having a problem?" He spoke through his teeth and his craned head twisted oddly.

Linda cooed in his ear.

"You don't have to pretend with me," Braxton said. "I know she showed you the mem-cube of us. I know she did that. So what?" His head jutted farther forward. "So what of it?"

At first, Evven thought he was being victimized with an ugly joke — then he realized he was just being victimized.

Linda pulled Braxton's collar back and sucked on his neck.

"Why did you bring me back? You brought me back to show me this?"

"I brought you back to tell you to get with it, son," Braxton said venomously. "You're taking too long with this. We've been waiting fifteen minutes to see you get flashed." He dangled the headband in Evven's face like it was a dead animal. "Get this on and get back with those bugs. Tonight over dinner, I want to watch the tape of them snipping your little head off. With wine and candlelight—" Braxton jerked erect, his face losing all expression. With tiny shuffling steps, he walked up the corridor, stopped, seemed to sniff the air, turned and tiny-shuffled back.

"We've both got it pretty bad," Linda said wistfully, watching Braxton's glazed face for the return of consciousness.

Evven tried to stand up, and realized how much his body still ached from being flashed before. He put his hands on the console deck and pushed himself up on his feet. He remembered something one of his teachers had told him when he was in school. "You don't have to *be* brave; just *act* brave." And it seemed to Evven that the enemy was the one trying hardest to kill him.

Braxton stopped in front of Linda and blinked heavily.

"Got that?" he demanded. Linda patted his back. "You understand what I'm telling you?"

"Sure I do." Evven leaned back on the console and touched a button that would reset the previous probe program. He waited for his peripheral vision to detect the green ready light.

Braxton held out his fist. "I have you, Blisson. I have you and I have your wife. I'm going to give you one scum-run after another till you flash terminal. And if you refuse an assignment, I'll give you a grade-six damage *with* an addendum recommending obedience training." He smirked.

Evven kicked him in the groin. He felt his foot sink into soft flesh. Braxton caught his breath and bugged his eyes. In the moment that he was immobile, Evven stepped out of the way,

grabbed Braxton's shoulders, turned him 180 degrees, and tripped him into the formchair. The chair reshaped itself to fit Braxton's heavy body.

Linda was sputtering and looking dismayed. "You cruel—"

Evven saw the ready light on the console turn green. From Braxton's sweating hand he took the headband and fitted it around the man's damp head. Every movement felt like knotted wire was being yanked through his muscles.

Evven slammed the SEND button and watched Braxton's face go slack. At that instant, Braxton would be finding himself walking about on six legs. Other nearby insects would undoubtedly observe him.

"You hurt him, you bastard," Linda said, reaching for Evven's eyes.

Though his muscles spasmed, he swept away her hands and then pushed her backward. "Don't," he said to her. "Just don't."

She stopped. She looked unsure of what to do next. She did nothing. She watched Braxton sitting there, slack-faced and mute.

Evven stepped around to 905 and told it to reset the previous program from 906. He waited, keeping an eye on Linda; there was no telling when she would make a move for Braxton's headband. He didn't know if he had enough agility to stop her. There a movement on the left — someone was coming up the corridor.

"Hello?" It was Jamison, wearing the powder green suit and insignia of a vice-president. He was all pleasantry and smiles. "Brought your lovely wife in to take a look at the business?" He rocked on his feet with his hands behind his back. His eyebrows danced up and down as he spoke. "What's with Supervisor Braxton?"

Evven glanced at Linda — she was getting ready to tell him something.

"He's getting a firsthand look at my project."

"That's a little dangerous, isn't it?" Jamison said affably.

"He's lying!" Linda yelped.

"She's zerked out," Evven said casually.

"Too bad," Jamison said, shaking his head. "She's very pretty, you know?"

Braxton was drooling; Evven had to keep Jamison from noticing.

"This bastard is lying to you!" she shouted in Jamison's face.

"Ever since she got into slavery, she's blossomed," Evven said.

"Really?" Jamison reached out and took one of her shoulders in his hand. "Really? Slavery? Giving or receiving?"

The clearance light on 905 clicked on.

"Receiving," Evven said.

"Let me go!" Linda said. Jamison held her snugly and grinned into her face. He whispered something and grinned more. He had his back to Evven.

Evven slipped on the headband,

lowered himself into the formchair and depressed the SEND button. His head buzzed.

Reality shimmered and before him appeared the alien's underground probe-works. Once again he resided inside the alien's consciousness and looked through his eyes. Evven detected surprise.

"I had a question," Evven thought quickly. "You were going to implant your people inside mine — so you must have some way of projecting a self-sustaining consciousness — even if the body dies."

"Yes." The alien felt a certain superiority, which Evven picked up.

"I want to go someplace. I don't know where it is, but it looks like this—" He thought fast and hard about the green place he had been constructing, the hills and the rocks and grass. "It would have to be inhabited. I want to go there."

The alien responded quickly. "There are several places like that."

"I want to go there permanently, now."

"There are many human colonies," the alien said, lithely strolling down the corridor, past the automated probe devices. "We know many of them, but there are some we've missed. You could work for us, locating colonies, and spreading the word that we're coming. See? You work for us."

"I'm not working for you. I'm not working for anybody. I need to be sent to this other place — quickly."

The alien rambled on down the corridor. In the dim light, its head swung from side to side as it walked. It showed its teeth. "See," the alien said, "you are going to work for us. This is a big deal. We don't want to be exterminated. See? You work for us."

Evven knew that if he thought, the alien would pick it up — so he didn't think. He just did it.

He let his consciousness balloon outward, and in a dark place in the alien's mind he felt a weakness, and it was there that he focused what strength he had — he focused and pried and felt things breaking loose — he felt little nightmares peeking around the ragged edges of the alien's consciousness. The alien was no longer walking. It stood frozen, its eyes wide and unblinking. Evven pried. He forced open the wound and out of it spilled a rushing chaos of small toothed things, biting, snarling things that yapped and clawed at any thought that moved. To Evven, the alien's nightmares were silly and harmless. The alien dropped to its belly and lay panting. All restraints it had put on Evven's access to its thoughts were lifted.

Evven looked and found what he was wanting. Using the alien's knowledge of the automated probe devices, he would have little difficulty — if he only had enough time. The time he would have would be a measure of Jamison's lust. He hoped he had not underestimated.

He made the alien rise to its feet,

turn to the nearest output, and reach its clawed forepaws toward the controls.

TThe first alien he entered was slick-bodied and silky, and when it detected Evven's consciousness, it dropped to its belly and writhed toward a hole in the ground. It sunk into darkness and prepared to die; it could withstand no interference in its mind. Evven withdrew.

He quickly reprogrammed the probe.

Through the eyes of the long-limbed humanoid alien, Evven watched a stream carry yellow leaves to a rocky place in the water that was all gurgles and ripples. He was lying under a purple tree, and beside one spidery hand was a gathering of pebbles. The alien selected one and lazily tossed it into the stream. Its mind moved with glacial slowness. It recognized Evven's presence, but was deciding it would communicate later. It tossed another rock.

Evven knew his time was running out — he would have to cut his connection with the probe device before Linda convinced Jamison she was not zerked out.

The alien lay on its back. There was nothing in its mind. It was utterly peaceful. Far away, an animal made a high-pitched whistling call. The brook gurgled.

"What a mistake," Evven thought.

The air around him suddenly shimmered and bubbled, and Jamison stood in front of him holding the headband.

"You've done a bad thing here," Jamison said. He nodded toward Braxton. Braxton slumped in his formchair; Linda had pulled off the headband and was dabbing the froth from his lips. "I'd say you were out of control." He looked very much like a vice-president with his smile and his powder green suit.

Evven nutted him. He had forgotten how much his human body hurt until his foot had already swept up and thumped into Jamison's groin. It hurt, but it didn't hurt as much as Jamison did — he dropped to his knees and slowly collapsed forward until his forehead touched the floor.

Evven saw something angular in Jamison's pocket. When he pulled it out — it was a mem-cube — Jamison was saying, "Don't flash me, please don't flash me...."

Evven put the cube into the Output. "I don't know why it took me so long to figure this out," he said. "All the time pissed off because things got screwed up."

He hefted Jamison into the formchair and slipped the headband on him. Knowing Jamison, it would be an entertainment involving slavery.

He went around the partition to where Linda soothed the half-conscious Braxton. "Get away from him," he said.

Linda stared up at him, defiant and half-wild. He drew back his fist and

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she snarled, "You wouldn't. You wouldn't dare, you creep."

He opened his hand and hit her. Her head snapped sideways.

"I just figured this out," he said, putting the headband back on Braxton.

"You're going to kill him," Linda whimpered.

Evven adjusted the Output. "I'm just going to let him and Jamison be found enjoying a slavery tape. As for you, you can do what you want — just don't do it to me." He took her chin in his hand and turned her face toward him. "I'm as responsible for this as you are. I just figured that out. I expected things to be nice. I thought I'd be a psychonaut, respected and admired, that I'd have a desirable wife, and that I'd live happily ever after. Fat chance." He put his hands on his hips. Everything ached. "Given the conditions that prevail—" (He nodded at Jamison and the glazed Braxton) "—I was a fool to expect anything else. Life *is* trouble."

He left her huddling there. Evven Blisson walked down the corridor past the Outputs to the tube. Halfway there, he met the co-worker he'd seen that morning.

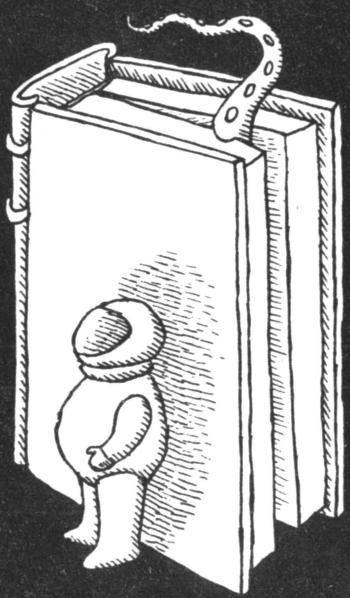
"How're things going?" the man asked jovially.

"Normal," Evven said. "About what you'd expect." He put his hand on the man's shoulder. "Let's go get a drink."

It was a normal day.

Books

ALGIS BUDRYS



Nifft the Lean, Michael Shea, DAW Books, $2.95

Clay's Ark, Octavia E. Butler, St. Martin's, $14.95

The Classics of Modern Science Fiction Series, George Zebrowski, ed., Crown, $7.95 each.

Men, Martians and Machines, Eric Frank Russell
The Joy Makers, James Gunn
The Shores of Another Sea, Chad Oliver
The Classic Philip José Farmer 1952-1964, Martin Harry Greenberg, ed.

Michael Shea is of course a writer well known to *F&SF* readers; a person with a talent for storytelling, displaying many additional appurtenances of civilized intellect. Nevertheless, it came as something of a shock to me while at the Fantasy Worldcon awards ceremony on Halloween in 1983 to hear it announced that Shea's *Nifft the Lean* had won the award for best novel of the year. The reason wasn't quite that I hadn't read it; there are plenty of books in that category.

Furthermore, I haven't even read every award-winning book since 1967, which appears to be the year I seriously took up reviewing. I have never read a book just because it won an award. There are too many awards. There have been too many blatant miscarriages of taste — I am willing to live with miscarriages of justice — and, at the heart of the matter, there is my policy. My policy: For these purposes, I am the center of the Universe and if a thing doesn't swim into my ken under

its own power, I'm not going to grab around for it.

I think that's the most reader-useful way to treat this whole reviewing business. I treat it as if I had wandered into a bookstore and were simply an accustomed SF reader shopping on my own account, which is something I remember how to do. I react more quickly to known bylines than to unknowns, and I judge many a book by its cover.

You can tell a lot about a book by the nature and quality of its packaging. In a sense, you're reviewing the publisher's acumen in recruiting a staff, thus drawing inferences on the acumen of the editors, thence deducing the qualities of the text and its author. That sounds like a long and tendencious reach, but you'd be surprised how well it usually works. Or maybe, being a long-time book buyer yourself, you wouldn't be surprised at all. Many books do get to the next stage, but in the case of a fair number the first impression has placed the overwhelming burden of proof very much on them, and not much additional confirmation is required to send them sailing away.

You should of course fight down most nauseas and sample the text at least a little bit. I do, indeed, pick a page in every volume I choose to handle, and read as much of it as I can before (A) finding something that looks like it might prematurely betray some interesting plot-turn, whereon I wipe it out of my mind and start the book at the beginning, or (B) I read as much of it as I can before I feel my gorge spasming or, worse, detect the onset of indifference.

Among the books I actually go this far with are all books by people I've never heard of. The track record sadly is that most of these unknowns deserve their anonymity, some of them proving to be people I have never heard of several times before.

From these preliminary screenings we arrive at two piles of books; those to be read and those to go to the rummage sale. Books accumulate at the rate of about three a day, rain or shine, weekends included, and one of the safe Father's Day presents in this household is more shelving lumber, rummage sales or no. What I'm saying to you is that, even allowing for slumps in the market, and duplications because I usually review for two or three places, about fifteen thousand individual titles have crossed my desk in hopes of a review. I imagine the pile of their discarded wrappings alone by now looms high enough to make a very good grade of Olympic ski-jump, which in the case of most of them is an appropriate image.

Thus, I do not read everything that comes in. I have the grocery marketing to do and the taking of the cat to the vet, and the decisions on what to do with Red China. So I certainly don't feel the slightest need to go out and actively seek more books to review. There are some publishers who either don't send me anything or send me

very little, steadily or sporadically, depending on days with a long lunch in them. In other words, some of the shelves in my pet bookstore are not properly stocked, and is that my fault?

I will tell you something else ... I don't even write down all of my reviews. Of the books I do read, a noticeable percentage simply aren't much worth talking about as far as I'm concerned. Usually, this happens with unexceptionable but minor work by major people. Sometimes, as a courtesy, it happens with bad work by usually top-flight people, although in such cases the courtesy is actually a form of biding my time.

Now, this does create some enigmatic situations. Did I not publish a review of a particular book because I never read it, because I did read it, or because I never got it? Am I perhaps pursuing some even more convoluted course?

For instance — I wasn't going to tell you this, but what the Hell — because I reviewed Gene Wolfe's *Book of The New Sun* volume by volume and because I haven't done anything of Brian Aldiss's in a very long time and because I want to do a thorough takeout on my latest feelings about *echt* English SF, I think I'm going to review all the *Helliconia* books in one lump when the series is complete, considering them probably comparable to the Wolfe effort, meanwhile not even reading them. That is my current intention. If no such feature ever surfaces, you can see how many different things that might mean. You can also see that my peregrinations through my store of books are affected by intrusions of idiosyncrasy, as those of right-thinking people of course are not.

Anyway, for one of these reasons I had not read *Nifft the Lean*. I felt a little jolt when it won its award, not in truth because I hadn't reviewed it or read it but because I'd never heard of it (except probably as a name on a list of nominees, which I never memorize because such lists are egregiously inflated by the authors' friends and debtors and in most SF parts this justly turns out to be one of your most common tickets to oblivion). But I never would have read *Nifft*, still. Time's winged juggernaut rumbles onward month after month, fresh review candidates spilling over its top and thudding down into my precincts in a fevered welter of fluttering pages. But something there is that wants *Nifft the Lean* reviewed here, and Don Wollheim swears it's still going to be in print by the time you read this, and so....

Nifft the Lean is a pretty good book; a very impressive book, a nice read. Let me explain what I mean by that:

An ideal "book" to me is a unified whole thing; an exact-size container, free of air, yet not dribbling over its rim. *Nifft the Lean* in this respect is a pretty good book; it's a quasi-collective of picaresque tales involving the

title character, set on an Earth of a time so distant there are no names or landmarks in common with ours, and thus invites comparison with, for instance, Jack Vance's *The Dying Earth*. *The Dying Earth* was in one sense less unified, since its chapters were actually stories about a large variety of characters rather than any one. But in a sense it was perfect; none of the characters' tales was weighted in disproportion to the others, and there were just enough tales across a wide enough perspective so that a good picture of the title subject emerged. Whereas Nifft the Lean, master thief, does not emerge so clearly delineated from Shea's book, nor does the book show us enough variety in his life to convince us we know him well.

Does the book then cry out for a sequel? In the sense that Nifft fascinates us and we desire to know more, no. What we do see of him does not hint at fascinating hidden depths.

I'm not sure Nifft was Shea's primary interest in writing this book. Rather, he seems more like a good, workmanlike job of writing the picaresque thief archetype; he is a lay figure to be walked through what Shea really wants to depict from his own interior. What that is, is not much like Vance, or like Gene Wolfe's superficially similar milieu of *The Book of The New Sun*. Shea's tales share that sort of setting just long enough to set up plunges into sub-universes featuring scenery and population one hasn't often seen since Heironymus Bosch hung up his jock. The demoniacal underworld into which Nifft adventures puts me in mind of something Mervyn Peake and William Golding might have suspected after overdosing on E. R. Eddison and H. P. Lovecraft. It is a milieu whose horrors are nonmystical: rank, furred, thorned, arachnoid, industrious, oozing.

And when I say "plunge," I am paying tribute to the scene in which Nifft enters Hell in a mining cart, a scene you will never forget, a scene that could only have been created by a first-rate imaginer of the fantastic, and a scene whose sheer storytelling bravura might distract from the even more impressive unwindings of the quieter portions of Shea's narratives, had I not pointed this out to you. With something very much like genius, Shea deploys his inventions so that much of the time they simply seem inevitable. There is not, I think, a more difficult feat.

And so this is a very impressive book, and a clearly deserving award-winner, without being a perfect book. It is, because of the sheer power of its author, far better and more interesting than the usual run of perfect or more nearly perfect book. Having read it, I know I would have badly missed it had I continued not to have read it. And those of you who have been waiting for this review before seeking it out would also have been to some (I think important) degree the less for it.

I look forward, very much, to Shea's next book, and have taken every step I can think of to ensure I get it — that is, I've in effect reserved my copy, since I have absolute faith that this forethoughtfulness will be rewarded. That, too, is something the dedicated book-buyer does from time to time, and my doing it therefore doesn't violate the ground rules.

However, something else occurs to me. It occurs to me belatedly that most book-buyers have a reviewer or some other friend whose recommendations they trust routinely, whereas I don't. While from time to time over the years I have, indeed, read books specifically because someone made an extraordinary effort in an intelligent way, those occasions haven't been many, or routine.

Let's change that. If there's a book you'd particularly care to see reviewed here — your own, or a friend's, or just because you think it deserves it — write me a letter c/o F&SF, Box 56, Cornwall, CT 06753. Mind you, I don't promise to review a single one of them, or at least I don't promise to do it in print. I do promise to be smart about what I do with the recommendation.

A book I almost didn't review is Octavia E. Butler's *Clay's Ark*. It is burdened by a discouraging, meaningless dust jacket that looks like an attempt to save money on the designer, the artist, the production cost and the blurb-writing. It is furthermore from a house with a very spotty track record; St. Martin's SF program has no overall feel, no clear direction, and no internal logic. The hand of plonk is all over it, and that does, indeed, affect the warmth of my reception for any St. Martin's book until proven not guilty.

Reading Butler's book thus turns out to be a pleasant surprise. The title does prove to be empty of meaning, but I have the feeling that's not Butler's fault; it hardly sounds like an author's title. *Clay's Ark* (Say it fast, three times. Sounds sweet on the ear, doesn't it?) is the name of the interstellar spaceship that comes back to Earth with a plague aboard; the story has nothing to do with anything ark-like nor with the spaceship per se. We never even see it, or its landing in the southwestern U.S. The story follows the surviving crewman, and then other people he infects over a period of years. *Clay's Plague*, while still far from spot-on, would have been a much better title on any number of counts, and certainly could have been arrived-at without burning out too many brain cells.

In any event, the story works. What the crewman infects Earth with is an alien symbiote that transforms the metabolism of humans and causes them to have children of superior physical and mental powers in an alien shape. The nature of the infection is such that its victims cannot effectively prevent themselves from having chil-

dren and can barely hold down the pace at which they will infect others.

The race of *homo sapiens* is doomed; what has been brought back from the stars is the end of human history. Fighting the grip of the organism, the crewman and his immediate "family" hide out in isolation, attempting to retard the inevitable doom, kidding themselves that they can do this while nevertheless compulsively kidnapping occasional travelers and adding them to the group.

That's what it's about, and Butler creates this tale with verve, originality, and an apparent gift for the circumstantial detail circumstantially told. This latter attribute may instead be a present inability to write in more than one tone of voice, but in any event she never strains for a pitch she's not up to. While rather far from ever reaching a resolution of any kind, this book is an effective piece of work in what might be called the "slice of death" school of SF writing. And there is the possibility a sequel is coming. For all I know, this is itself the middle book in a trilogy, Part One — which ought to have been called *Clay's Ark* — having escaped my gleanings. If so, neither the blurbs nor St. Martin's PR handouts in any way betray this.*

**This may perhaps not be the appropriate juxtaposition for the following announcement, but what the Hell. Someday — someday soon, I think — I am going to publish my detailed report on the manner, quality, and blunder-level of the blurbing and PR writing done for books. You may assume in advance that it is not a paen of admiration.*

If, by the way, Butler's story is built in part on my own "Silent Brother," a story now a quarter-century old, that's O.K. with me; I didn't invent the idea either.

"Most of these works have been out of print for several years. Some have never been published in hardcover, or even in book form. Real science fiction fans have never forgotten them, but the younger audience has never had the chance to read such standards like *The Joy Makers* by James Gunn, and other books which have become prototypes for contemporary science fiction." (Exactly) so saith Jake Goldberg, editor at Crown Publishers, Inc. What he says this about is Crown's new *Classics of Modern Science Fiction* series, devoted to republishing material from the Golden Age of "Modern" science fiction — 1939 through 1949, I would date that — and from a little beyond.

The series is actually edited by George Zebrowski, who, and I assume he is thanking his God, does not share with Goldberg the same copywriter with the same head for logical asseveration. (And you thought I was going to go after the grammar!)

Somehow, this is nevertheless an important event in SF book publishing, and has thus far produced at least four books worth having in one's basic library. I presume there is actually no "somehow" about it and that Zebrowski's taste and skill have transcended

all attempts to plonk-up this project.

The series is at least four uniformly-packaged books, about 5¼" x 7¼" and running toward 215 pages casebound (in imitation cloth) on pretty good paper, with attractively designed dust-wrappers, at $7.95 each. Isaac Asimov contributes a Foreword to each. As near as I can make out, it is word-for-word the same Foreword. Zebrowski and Martin Harry Goldberg author Introductions among the four, each different.

What are these first four books? In the order of their numbering, they are *Men, Martians and Machines*, a collection of short stories by Eric Frank Russell; *The Joy Makers*, a novel by James Gunn; *The Shores of Another Sea*, a novel by Chad Oliver, and *The Classic Philip José Farmer 1952-1964*, a collection edited by Greenberg.

You would not think, would you, that these would be the first four in any such series. At first glance, there surely ought to be more deserving books; surely, these are not the first two novels one would propose here. When one additionally considers the quality of the accompanying PR — which consisted of the insufficient, inadequately couched — one can hardly be blamed for drawing back a little.

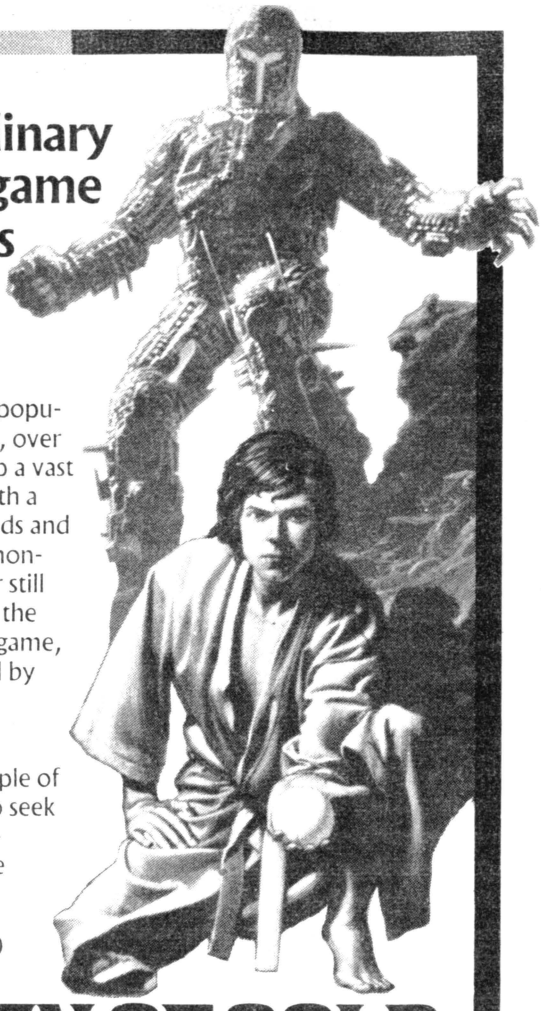
But in fact, the series is selling remarkably well, Marty Greenberg tells me; at this writing, it is more than viable, and we all ought to be glad.

I don't know, still, that Oliver — who holds the patent on the anthopological SF story, and who can write it better than anyone else at novelette length — is very much of a novelist despite some strong endorsements on the book jacket. But this is by far his best novel, and one of the most striking novels of alien contact with Earthpeople ever written, cast as it is in the viewpoint of a scientist whose animals begin studying him.

And although James Gunn's contributions to speculative fiction are numerous and prestigious, I think his scholarly efforts now overshadow his fiction writing. Nevertheless, *The Joy Makers* — butted together from stories published in the mid 1950s — displays an uncommon energy and inventiveness in dealing with a social theme that was then brand-new (predating the invention of the term 'lifestyle' by some considerable margin, and seriously questioning the oldfashioned virtues of character on which much of "Modern" science fiction founded its mores).

Phil Farmer, of course, is now a well-known quantity in this field. But the retrospective put together by Greenberg will shock you to exactly the extent you believe this to be true. Or, if it does not, you already knew the extent to which Farmer revolutionized certain aspects of this *metier*. You might appreciate going back for a look at what the man was writing in the course of breaking SF out of several

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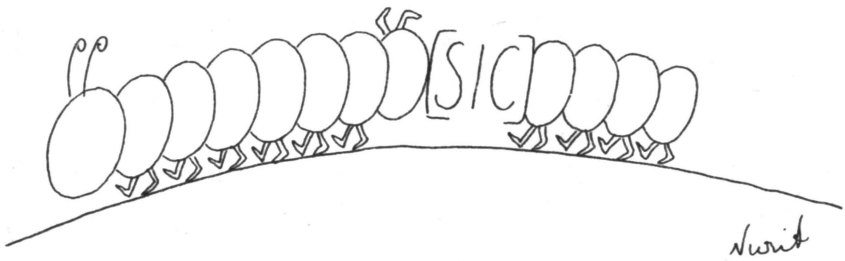
very strait-laced jacketings. There was a time, you know, and not all that distant, when all of us were supposed to write only about Barbie and Ken.

And Eric Frank Russell ... what a wonderful man he was! Not a giant in this field, although a writer of much delightfully entertaining work with unexpected sting to it. But what a wise, witty and twinkle-eyed man he was; a good companion on the road, the sort of writer a field ought to be proud to be judged by.

What these are, in *Men, Martians and Machines,* are the Jay Score series stories. "Symbiotica" was published in the first issue of Astounding I ever read, in 1943 at the age of twelve with my eyes opening wider and wider. I did not realize at the time that in this particular story I was encountering a seminal pioneering work. (For that matter, the same issue also contained a Mixed Men story by A.E. van Vogt and a Gallagher story by Lewis Padgett.) All I knew was, I was getting, at last, a pure dose of the stuff that could hook you for life.

Oh, God, and I love it still, and sour when it is shabbily treated, grumping at those who handle it uncaringly, sometimes afraid, I think, that I will be hustled into the presence of more shabby persiflage than I can bear. But here Zebrowski has redeemed what others would surely have made mediocre, and done it while being enough in love with the field himself to have risked doing something besides the safely sure-fire. It is delightful to hear that he has apparently tapped into a genuine vein; that proves much for all of us.

I send you to his good offices as freely as I would send any other best friend.



Avram Davidson and Grania Davis ("The Hills Beyond Hollywood High," April 1983) offer a new tale about an office computer that seems, well, haunted....

Dear Friend Charlene

BY
AVRAM DAVIDSON and GRANIA DAVIS

Ms. V was a beast again today, and everyone at the office was so worried about Charlene, who operated the sleek word-processing system. She just turned thirty, and a drunk in a big pickup rammed her little Honda on the highway. Need I say more? I needn't.

Janet wanted to leave early so she could visit Charlene at the hospital. We'd all chipped in for a fancy card and a gift, and Janet wanted to avoid downtown rush-hour traffic. Even if fighting it *is* supposed to build character. When Ms. V saw Janet fixing up her desk to go, she swooped on her broomstick. Ms. V is our office manager, and she sure must love Halloween. She wouldn't need a costume to win the prize for beastliness.

"Where do you think you're going?" the V snarled.

"To see Charlene," said Janet softly. "Would you like to sign the card?"

"I've already signed the card," snapped Ms. V. "What time does this office close?" As if she didn't know. Must have a time clock up her innermost sphincter.

"Five," sighed Janet. Janet's kind of pretty.

"And what time is it *now?*" growled Ms. V. Her and her goddamn *word* games.

"Quarter to five, but I thought...."

"You are paid to do accounts, not to *think*," barked Ms. V. As if *she* were paid to bark clichés, and not to manage the office.

"Sorry," said Janet, settling back into her desk. "I'll go later." Ms. V flared her nostrils a bit, then moved off, muttering. What a sweetheart.

Charlene never returned to the office. Never recovered. Just slipped into a coma and died. It hit us hard. She'd

worked here nearly seven years, and everyone liked her a lot. Charlene was friendly and competent. Was single. Was a slight, attractive woman with dark blonde hair, married and divorced young. No kids or relatives in the area.

The news hit Janet very hard, and we could all see she'd been drinking heavily during lunch. Janet was small, intense, a wiry brunette. She and Charlene had been very close friends — they were about the same age, both single, and lived in the same neighborhood. They liked to go out for dinners and shows together on the weekend, or for afternoon walks, shopping, lunch. In the summer they went biking and jogging together. Close. Too close? I don't know. Just wondered, seeing how hard it hit Janet. Because I like Janet. I like her a lot.

I liked Charlene a lot.

"We'd better get Janet sobered up before Ms. V sees her," I muttered to Carol, whose desk is nearest mine in the office.

"Let's take her somewhere for coffee, Jack," she murmured. Warm, dark, plump, with a quiet and motherly sense of humor. That's Carol. Janet seemed grateful that someone noticed and cared.

"Where have you three *been?*" demanded Ms. V, when we got back from coffee break a little late.

Before I could say, *Up the cow's ass for a milk shake,* Carol laid her large, friendly hand on Ms. V's shoulder. "Janet was a little upset, so we went for coffee. I'm sure you understand, Ms. V."

Ms. V wriggled the hand off and ostentatiously sniffed Janet's breath. "I understand that Janet gets *upset* pretty often lately. Don't think *I* haven't noticed. Anything that reduces efficiency is something I *must* notice. If Janet shows up again, lurching and reeking, well, you can be sure Mr. K will hear about it." And she hustled off, her heinie where her head should have been.

What the hell! This was the first time that Janet's drinking had been noticeable at the office, though we all knew she was a boozer. This was a rough day for her — for *her?* But she wasn't 'lurching or reeking' (vodka doesn't *reek,* for God's sake!), and her work as an accountant was just fine.

What the hell! But life is rarely fair — not out in the real world. So what could I *say?* If I provoked Ms. V, she'd just focus her hostility on me. Because, except for Mr. K, I was the only man in the office. I felt a knot twisting in my stomach as I returned to my desk.

A therapist would have told me to pound a pillow. But the office doesn't *have* any pillows — and I can't afford a therapist. Anyway.

Later that day Mr. K called me into his comfortable wood-and-leather private pen, to tell me with an oily smile that I'd been promoted to Charlene's old job, operating the word-processing system. *Oh,* boy!

See, I took a masters in Icelandic Poetry. That means I'm only employable as a mid-level office worker. At least a masters teaches you to *type*.

Ms. V continued to be a beast, and Janet began showing up at the office, late, after lunch. We knew she was hanging out in a cocktail lounge near our building — the bar on the corner — drinking, hardly eating at all. Sometimes she almost *was* lurching. She made several major errors in the books, and her face grew haggard. Charlene's death had really blown Janet's fuses. Ms. V took over the master accounts herself, saying the company couldn't afford any more mistakes. She was on the warpath, and we were all worried. *And then one day—*

One day, as I was storing some bookkeeping files onto the diskettes, a very spooky thing happened. Suddenly the video display screen went entirely blank. I thought I'd accidentally deleted something, and braced myself for a confrontation with the V. But no matter which controls I tried, the screen remained blank, and the system seemed down.

Then very slowly, almost haltingly, the bright cursor moved across the screen, as letters appeared and shaped themselves into words:

JANET MUST STOP DRINKING OR SHE'LL LOSE HER JOB.

What's *this?*

More: I MISS JANET, TOO, BUT SHE CAN'T DESTROY HERSELF. — YOUR FRIEND CHARLENE

What the hell? My *friend* — Charlene! Was this some kind of rotten hoax? I jerked my head to Carol at the next desk, to come over and look.

"What do you think of *this?*" I asked her as she peered at the screen.

Her reaction was almost the same as my own. "Is this some dirty, rotten joke?" she asked.

"I don't know what *else.* Just doing some routine storage when it suddenly appeared like that."

Her angry scowl gave way to a look of uncertainty. "Maybe Ms. V did it to frighten Janet.... Let's just delete it and forget it...."

I typed, Y to eliminate the strange line on the screen. The words vanished. The video display screen went blank, and the cursor paused and flickered — then new letters and words formed:

DON'T SEND ME BACK. — YOUR FRIEND CHARLENE

On a whim I typed in, "BACK WHERE?" (return)

BACK WHERE IT IS SO VAST AND LONELY. — CHARLENE

"DO YOU KNOW WHO WE ARE? (Y/N)," is what I typed next.

JACK AND CAROL.

Right — I'm Jack, and the woman at the next desk is Carol — and there's no way a computer could possibly know that.

Carol inhaled sharply with surprise. "What *is* this?" she whis-

pered. *Whim*pered, really.

I typed: "CAN YOU *SEE* US? (Y/N)."

SEEING NEEDS EYES. — YOUR FRIEND CHARLENE

Oh, I didn't want to think about her eyes when she was alive! Her lovely eyes—

"HOW DO YOU KNOW IT'S US?" is what I typed. "HOW DO YOU KNOW JANET'S BEEN DRINKING? HOW CAN YOU COMMUNICATE?" (return)

I DON'T KNOW. KNOWING NEEDS A MIND. — CHARLENE

"WHERE ARE YOU?" (return)

DON'T KNOW.

"WHAT'S IT LIKE?" (return)

LIKE TV STATIC — EXPANDING ENDLESSLY IN EVERY DIRECTION — SOMETIMES IT CLEARS SO I CAN....

The words on the screen wavered, flickered, disappeared. The video display screen remained dark for a moment, and then the cursor and bookkeeping data reappeared — all in proper order. Good thing, too, for there was Ms. V, the sweetheart, standing alongside my desk. Same stale old scene, but she would play it over. And over.

"What's going on here? You're paid to work, not to stand around and gossip. Well?"

"Carol and I were just going over this bookkeeping file," is what I said. I was in no fit mood for a V tantrum. No. But—

"Carol is no bookkeeper; why should she inspect the books? I recognize time-wasting when I see it. Well?" Ms. V folded her thin, leathery arms over her flat bosom and scowled, deepening the creases in her narrow face. She wore an expensive-looking gray wool suit, and a new-looking gray silk blouse, such as nobody else in the office buys. *So how does she afford those clothes on her salary?* the gals used to ask about Ms. V. Her hair was short, gray, and wispy, and she exuded hostile grayness.

Carol slipped back to her own desk, and I went on entering the bookkeeping data; but I felt weird. Wouldn't you? Sure, it was still the same musty office on the fourth floor of the brick Haskell Building. The walls and carpets were still blah beige. The long row of windows, lined with scruffy potted plants, overlooked the same tasty view of a treeless city street, lined with crud and cars, low commercial buildings and more crud — ah, the romantic city! The fluorescent lighting tubes and dusty white acoustic tiles were overhead as always. The word processor, Cuisinart of the mind, sat on its own walnut-finish desk top in high-tech splendor, while the drawers contained the usual clutter of paper clips, tissues, and scribbled notes. And yet, everything had suddenly changed in a creepy, frightening way — and I didn't *like* it.

I'm a sensible man in my late thirties. Just starting to show some gray at the temples — and hoping it looks distinguished. Divorced, with an ungrateful teenage son. I've worked this

job for years, to feed my rotten kid and keep the roof unleaky. I spend my weekdays at the office, and my evenings doing chores, and relaxing with a little TV and a little drink. On the weekends I do more chores. Try to talk to my son and heir. Try to have some small fun.

I'm not religious, maybe reformed agnostic. *I* don't believe in ghosts, reincarnation, or any of that. I don't believe that dead people can communicate with the living ... I'm not even sure the living can communicate with each other. Just look around you.... I believe that the dead are *dead*. I *know* they are. See?

Well, so how could a computer display messages from Charlene? How could a machine know that we were JACK AND CAROL? It frightened me. And I didn't like it. Not one damn little bit.

A few days later. I was editing some form letters when the text on the screen suddenly vanished. Once again there was the slow, halting movement of the cursor, and the formation of words....

IS JANET STILL DRINKING? — YOUR FRIEND CHARLENE

I quickly typed, "YES, SHE IS." (return)

SHE MUST STOP. YOUR SON'S CAR NEEDS BRAKE WORK. THERE COULD BE AN ACCIDENT. — CHARLENE

Huh? Ann Landers and Her Electronic Motor Repair Manual. What?

"HOW DO YOU KNOW?" (return)

SOMETIMES IT CLEARS AND I CAN....

The screen went blank, and the text of the form letter reappeared.

I told Carol at the next coffee break.

"Are you sure that's what you saw?" She looked uncomfortable.

"Of course, I'm sure! You saw it yourself the other day—"

She looked worried now, as well as uncomfortable, and these emotions obliged her to readjust the neat blue polyester knit suit where it wrapped around her ample behind. "Should we tell Janet?" she asked.

I had doubts. "It might *upset* Janet, make her go on a *binge*."

"Or it *might* snap her out of it," Carol said. "Charlene is right. Whenever Ms. V thinks Janet's been drinking, she mutters like a teapot about to boil over. Jan easily could be fired."

"So you really think it's Charlene?"

"I don't know what to think, and it's scary!" said Carol. "I wonder if we can ... summon ... Charlene. Then let Janet see and decide for herself."

We walked nonchalantly back to the word processor. I typed *d* from the menu to "OPEN NEW FILE: CHARLENE."

The computer peeped like a baby chick, and signaled an invalid file name. Then nothing happened. Nothing at all. We were disappointed. But mostly relieved.

I decided to call home. Timmy answered. Nice of him. He probably thought it was some girl, by the way he said, "Oh. Dad. You." He rallied.

Asked, "Uh, what's *happening*?" I rarely make phone calls from work. Ms. V doesn't like personal calls on company time.

"Timmy, how are your brakes?"

"Uh. Y'know. Fine. I guess. Why?"

"Get them checked today."

"Uh. *Why?* Y'know?"

I get no respect. "Because I say so, that's why! Besides. A crazy hunch, they might be bad."

"It costs a wad takin' the car inna shop — just for some crazy hunch — y'know?" Get a *job* and you'll *have* a wad. However—

"I'll pay."

"You *will?* That's radical! Uh — could I get, y'know, a new battery, too? Been having trouble starting on cold mornings." His tone was calculating. Thought I'd gone crazy, but decided to humor the old man. Get what he could *while* he could. Y'know?

Still. My *son*. "Yeah, sure, get the battery. But have those brakes checked first!"

"O.K. Don't hyper-spaz, huh? Paint's chippin', too — looks grody. Could *rilly* use a new paint job, uh, with racing stripes — y'know?" he said, pushing his luck too far.

"Check the brakes! Get the battery. Forget the paint. Take the car. Check. The. Brakes. You hear me? *Right. Now.*"

"*Fer sure!*"

When I got home that evening, my lanky blond son in his regulation T-shirt, faded jeans, and bumpy complexion, looked up from his snack and TV, and gave me a long, strange gaze. "How didja know about the brakes, Dad?"

"What happened?"

"The mechanic said the seal on the master brake cylinder was leaking and ready to go. The brakes could've failed any time — there could've been a bad accident!"

"Just a crazy hunch," I repeated. Gave him a weak grin.

"You shrewd dude," he said, grinning back. But the grin wobbled.

I slipped shakily into the cluttered kitchen, with its worn and battered appliances, souvenirs of my ex-wife, Gloria, who went off to find herself. I slipped a package of frozen crud in the toaster oven, and mixed me a drink.

SOMETIMES IT CLEARS — AND I CAN....

That's what the video display screen had said. But how could a computer know my son's brakes were bad — *how?* And why didn't my son do a few chores to show appreciation? Where would Charlene appear next — in the grimy glass door of the toaster oven? On the TV? Maybe Great Aunt Hattie, the spiritualist, will show up on the old Singer while my mother is fixing a seam, saying *"There Is No Sorrow in Summerland"* in white thread!

It was creepy — still, I was grateful. She (or It) might have just saved my son's life. Rotten kid. I resolved that next time, I *would* tell Janet. And

I finished my drink.

The following Monday. Everybody had the start-of-the-week blahs, and the weather was chilly and overcast. Janet looked bleary-eyed and hung-over, with puffy red blotches on her pretty face. Must have been hitting the bottle all weekend. As soon as I tried to retrieve a file, letters and words began to form on the screen: JANET MUST STOP DRINKING. — YOUR FRIEND CHARLENE

I raced over to Janet's desk. "There's something I got to show you," I said.

"Just a *min*ute, I'm right in the middle of these books," she said, irritably.

"This won't wait, Jan. It's important."

She was in one rotten mood. Grumbled, but came to my desk. By the time we got there, the message had partially faded. It read: JANET MUST STOP DRINK....

She snapped, "What's this, a tract from AA?" Furious red blotches showing in her cheeks. Red threads in her blue eyes.

"No. It's some kind of weird message. From Charlene."

Janet flashed a glare. *"What?"*

"It's true. It's true. Ask Carol."

"That's not funny. That's not nice. If you guys have something personal to say about my drinking, well, just *say* it." A tear welled in one red-threaded eye.

The message was slipping away, slipping away. JANET MUST, was all it read now. Charlene was fading out, and there was no way to call her back or make Janet believe me. She'd think I was on her case about drinking. Just like Ms. V. Oh, hell. Why is life so—

Suddenly the message flashed quickly and clearly back onto the screen in highlighted caps: JANET MUST STOP DRINKING. — YOUR DEAR FRIEND CHARLENE

"What's that all *about?*" Janet whispered.

"*I* don't know," I said. "It only happens occasionally. Claims to be messages from Charlene — from Beyond? I didn't believe it at first, thought it was a hoax. Then it said that my son's *brakes* were bad — and it was *true.* Now it repeats that you must stop drinking or you'll lose your job. And Carol saw it, too."

I could hear Janet swallow. Then she asked, "Can you respond?"

"Well ... you can't summon it, but you can type in responses. Sometimes it answers and sometimes it just fades away."

With a painfully tense expression on her face, Janet typed, "IS THIS CHARLENE? (Y/N)."

YES, JANET, IT'S CHARLENE. I MISS YOU.

Janet murmured, "A computer can't do that."

"I know."

Janet typed, "WHERE ARE YOU?" (return)

IT'S SO VAST AND LONELY. IT'S NO PLACE YOU KNOW.

"WHAT DO YOU WANT?" (return)

PLEASE STOP DRINKING. YOU'LL GET SICK. YOU'LL LOSE YOUR JOB.

Tears puddled in Janet's eyes as the message gradually faded to: PLEASE STOP....

Then Ms. V swooped down to my desk. We'd been so engrossed, we hadn't noticed her watching and preparing to pounce. Like a buzzard waiting for the moose to drop. Moose? Gazelle? Gorilla? Gerbil? Oh, who gives a shit. "What's going *on?*" growled Ms. V.

"Just checking the accounts." Mumble mumble.

"How *dare* you fool around with the accounts! Have the books moved Janet to tears — or is she *upset* again? It happens more and more often, and her work has declined badly. I'm doing *all* the master accounts myself, even though it's not in my job description. I think maybe we'll have a little *chat* with Mr. K this afternoon." Ms. V was flushed with rage. At least maybe that muddy tinge in the gray skin of her face was flush.

"Ah, come on," I began.

But she was too trembly-angry to be ah-come-on'd. "As for *you*, Jack, you spend an awful lot of valuable work time hanging around and gossiping with the women. This is a place of business, not a singles bar." She jerked her head around. Sure enough. No ferns. Then she glanced at the screen. "Why have you entered PLEASE STOP....?"

"It was just a sample, to show Janet some functions of the system."

"Maybe the system would function better if you didn't keep bugging it with your *sam*ples," Ms. V grumbled as she stalked away on her flamingo legs, claws clicking.

Then the message faded entirely. Was instantly replaced by a new one: I LOVE YOU, JANET. STOP DRINKING. — CHARLENE

Tears streaked Janet's cheeks, and she raced to the ladies' room so Ms. V wouldn't see. (I think Ms. V has no bladder.) (I think Ms. V has no vagina either, but I lack all desire to investigate.)

The message faded slowly, the computer functioned normally for the rest of the day, and I managed to get away a little early.

After that the messages came irregularly, and whenever they appeared, I tried to get Janet's and Carol's attention without Ms. V noticing. But now she was watching us closely, and whenever she saw us grouped around the screen, she would fly over on her damn broomstick to spy and curse and hiss. "Playing your fascinating computer games *again*, people? I wish you all found your *work* so fascinating! Plugged into some computerized dating network? Don't think it will do any of you much good." And she leered off. Damn the person. I hoped a maddened aardvark would do sundry sordid things to her.

Charlene seemed to sense when

Ms. V was coming, and the message was usually gone before the V could see it. Only sometimes not.

CAROL, SELL RUTHERFORD STOCK. — YOUR DEAR FRIEND CHARLENE

This flashed on the screen one drizzly afternoon. "Wonder how she knows I have Rutherford stock?" asked Carol, with a small, scared smile.

"Same way she knows anything," I said. "Didn't she always like to play around with the stock market? Kept track of company earnings and splits with charts and graphs. Did pretty well, too — I'd pay attention, if I were you."

Suddenly the message faded. Ms. V materialized behind us; all she caught was a glimpse that said: CAROL, SELL RUTH....

"Why in heaven's name has a sophisticated and costly piece of business equipment been programmed to read, 'Carol sell Ruth'?" demanded Ms. V. "And *who?* Is *Ruth?*"

"Just a ... a sample," I said, lamely. I knew I'd been using the excuse too often. Guess my days of slick excuses were over.

Oh, boy, though. Didn't she glare at me! "Either this system has bugs, or *you* do, Jack," Ms. V snarled. "We'll have it checked out. *One* of you could be replaced."

After that I was more cautious. Instead of showing Janet and Carol the messages, I just jotted them in a little notebook. Janet missed being able to respond, but she *was* trying hard to watch her drinking. It was a battle for her, but she *tried.* Hard. The messages from Charlene gave her hope. She knew that someone (or something) really *cared.*

Actually, I really cared, too. Had a little crush on Janet for a while. But gotta watch the eleventh commandment: *Thous shalt not screw around at the office* — especially this office.

I finally had to believe it, but I could never really accept it. It was too spooky and extraordinary for a sensible and ordinary person like me. Yet it *was* strangely helpful. Janet *was* drinking much less. And Rutherford *did* go bankrupt, and Carol would have lost a bundle if she hadn't sold out in time. And I could never forget my son's brakes. I couldn't accept it — yet I had to believe it. Was it really Charlene, or some creepy glitch in the system?

After all, the brain gives off electricity, and, well, maybe the *mind* does.... Who used to say that? Someone—

Oh.

Charlene.

One morning Mr. K came over to my desk. "Morning, Jack," he smiled. Mr. K always smiles, and Ms. V always frowns. Are they playing good-cop/bad-cop? He gave me that we're-both-*men* upper-arm punch. Son of a bitch.

"Good morning, Mr. K. The weather's improving," I said. Yockle-bobble blurtle-smurf.

"*Oh*, sure. *Got* to. By the way. Ms. V mentioned that you're having, ah, *prob*lems? With the *word*-processing system?"

"Problems?" Never *heard* the word. What mean, *problems?* "No, no *prob*lems — none at all."

The oh-but-you-can-tell-*me* look from him. The really-I-am-not-catching-*on* look from me. Onward. "Ms. V says that you and the gals often fiddle around with the keyboard, and that odd, inappropriate phrases sometimes appear on the screen." Gelatinous smirk. Son of a bitch.

I heard my voice say, "No, no, nothing inappropriate!" Heard my own voice grow tense, tring to reassure him. "I was just showing the gals how to operate the system. Those were just *examples.*"

"Yes, I *see*," said the K, with his baby-oil smile. "Still, we must avoid any so-called glitches, which could wreck our efficiency for *days.* Hmnymf? Ms. V is usually pret-ty reliable. I'll have the word processor checked out. It's due for regular servicing soon anyway. In the contract, you know." God. What would this mean!

An anxious voice was babbling, "Oh, it's working just *fine!* I'll guarantee that. No reason to send it in yet, no reason at all. That would just interrupt my work flow. It's just fine, Mr. K — be*lieve* me!" K's eyes flickered, like a half-submerged crocodile's.

"*We'll* see," he smiled, and he oozed away from my desk, leaving a strong reptilian musk behind him. Or maybe it was just aftershave.

I felt something close to panic. If they sent the word processor in to be serviced, what would happen to that infinitely delicate, incredibly tenuous connection, never supposed to be in such electronic whizbangs at all...? What would happen? What would happen to ... *Charlene?*

That day I ate with Janet and Carol in the little cafeteria on the top floor of our building. Had my usual gourmet lunch, egg salad on whole wheat. Black coffee. Carol was on a cottage cheese diet, as usual. Janet wanted to gain some weight. Had a hot roast beef on rye. I couldn't afford it.

Nobody ate very much.

Out with it, Jack.

"Ms. V told Mr. K the word processor has *bugs.* He wants to send it in to be checked. I tried to tell him it was O.K., but I could see he didn't believe me."

"But what will that do to Charlene?" — Carol.

"Who knows." — Janet. Grimly. "The whole thing is so strange ... and delicate. Who knows what'll happen if they mess around with it."

"Oh, I'd miss her!" sighed Carol. "...if anything happened."

"So would I," Janet said, a sad look on her thin, pretty face. "It would be like she died all over again."

"What should we *do?*" Me asking. Answers? They looked dismayed. Shrugged. Power; we had no power.

Opinions; sure, we could say things starting with 'In my opinion,' but we had no real voice in office policies or procedures. Nobody asked our opinions. And assertiveness training doesn't help much, that I can see. Mouthing off was/is one of the quickest ways to get yourself canned.

"Terminated," they say nowadays.

We looked at each other helplessly.

"Maybe we should steal it." — Janet. Softly.

"*Steal* it?" — Carol. Loudly. Too loudly.

"Shhh!" — Janet again. Looking around as though for spies. "We *could* steal it. And substitute another identical word processor in its place."

"But they cost ten thousand dollars," said Carol.

"You'd have lost nearly that much if she hadn't warned you about Rutherford," said Janet. "And how much is Jack's son's life worth?" (Don't ask, I thought.) "If we each chip in a third, we could buy a replacement, kidnap, well, uh ... kidnap Char*lene!*" Simple. Chip in — as though my own chips contained any spare $3,333.33

"But how would we get it out of there?" is what I asked. "It's a big piece of equipment. You can't just slip it in your purse like taking a handful of paper clips. And Ms. V always stays on her guard dog duty until everyone else has left."

Janet had evidently thought about it all. "You could hide in the john," said she to me. "On Friday afternoon. And there's that big broom closet where *I* could hide. I'm pretty small. I'd hunch down behind all that junk stored in there. Then, while you both carry the old system down to the freight elevator, I'll disconnect the burgler alarm and unlock the doors from inside, and you bring in the new equipment. It's the *only* way to rescue Char*lene!*"

That's what she said. Wild idea. A crackbrained caper.

I asked, "What if Charlene can find us only here at the office? The Haskell Building might be her main connection, not the computer."

Carol nodded. "We should *ask* her. And—"

"And what if we get caught?" is what I asked. "The building *is* guarded. We wouldn't be invisible, lugging expensive electronic equipment at odd hours. We could go to jail — or lose our *jobs!* I can't afford to lose mine; can you? And try to find another job if you get fired for stealing equipment."

Remorseless logic. They wilted. Sad to see. I was right, of course. Janet wanted to do something wild, like a Grade B action movie. I was being sensible, as usual. Sensible, but ... well ... helpless.

Charlene knew what was happening. That afternoon these words formed on the screen: INTERFERENCE MIGHT DESTROY THE CONNECTION. — YOUR DEAR FRIEND CHARLENE

"HOW CAN I STOP THEM?" (return) is what I typed.

STOP THEM.... was the answer. Then the words faded. So many things fade. Life. Beauty. Hope.

Because, realistically, *how* could I stop — well, *anything*? Oh, sure, I was the only man on the floor, often invoked for that reason to Open Things That Were Stuck, but I was just another piece of office equipment to Ms. V and Mr. K.

The V hung around my desk, lurking. Smirking. She knew I was upset about something. I think she really believed I'd plugged the computer into a secret social network ... and in a way I suppose it was true. Charlene alternated between trying to cheer us up and trying to warn us of danger. Whenever Ms. V was gone, message followed message:

DON'T WORRY.

THE VASTNESS IS ELATING.

YOU'RE DOING GREAT, JANET.

IF THEY TOUCH THE SYSTEM, EVERYTHING WILL CHANGE.

YOUR JOBS ARE SAFE.

STOP THEM.

THEY NEED YOU.

STOP THEM.

And, over and over: — YOUR DEAR FRIEND CHARLENE

It was a bad, very *bad* day when the men came to carry away the word processor to be serviced. Pall bearers. Just before they disconnected the video display screen, I saw it flash — Guess what? — CHARLENE.... Then it vanished. Nobody saw it. Nobody knew. All gone.

While the computer was down, Ms. V plugged me into one of our Selectrics. And when the computer came back and was installed again? No Charlene? *No Charlene.* Drive a man to drink.

This all hit me hard. Very hard. I *missed* Charlene. *Me.* A lonesome, mid-life, mid-level office worker. Well, it didn't matter. Hell with it. Didn't matter. Let Ms. V rant all she wanted to. Didn't—

Then, *then.* Right then on that damned drizzly, dreary afternoon, I heard a sudden shriek from Ms. V — followed by a porcine grunt from Mr. K — followed by exclamations of surprise from everyone in the office. As every typewriter in the place — electronic, electric, and the few holdover old manuals, went beserk. *Really* went beserk. Began typing, each one on its own, keys drumming — drumming wildly — and each relentlessly repeating the same phrases; exactly the same phrases:

MS. V IS FUDGING THE BOOKS.

MS. V IS FUDGING THE BOOKS.

CHECK: MASTER ACCOUNTS DATED FEB. 13, MARCH 12.

MS. V IS FUDGING THE BOOKS.

CHECK: MASTER ACCOUNTS MARCH 26, APRIL 12, APRIL 20.

SHAME ON YOU, MS. V.

SHAME ON YOU, MS. V.

— YOUR DEAR FRIEND CHARLENE

A commotion! Ms. V frothed. Mr. K assured her that it was some sort of trick. "... and whosoever is respon-

sible, I'll have their *jobs!*"

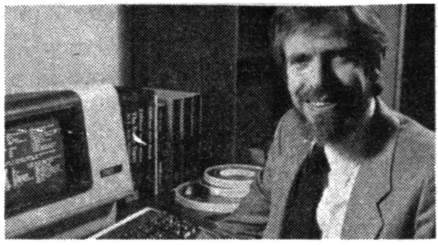
— Lots of luck, Mr. K! V flapped her bat wings and fainted. K moved off at full speed, grunting, "Have'm checked, have'm checked, have those accounts checked! *Now!*"

Some people clustered around Ms. V. "Omigod, she looks like *death*," I heard someone moan. Carol maybe. *I* didn't think Ms. V looked like death, I though death must look like Ms. V.

And others just stared at the office machines, now rapidly clattering out more dates, dates.... I just sat where I was, feeling as rotten as I'd felt for months. As aging corporate clone, with a rotten child and a rotten job. One beautiful thing had happened in my life, and it had happened briefly, and it was all over, and it would never happen to me again — and everytime I thought of it was like a knife in me, and I thought about it all the time. *What about me? What about me?* What with the late hour and the commotion, I knew I could slip away easy, not to the bar on the corner, but the bar *around* the corner—

Halfway out of my chair, then on my video display screen there silently flashed these final words: LOVER, I DO REMEMBER. BUT PLEASE, JACK, YOU'VE GOT TO CUT THE DRINKING. — YOUR DEAR FRIEND CHARLENE

Then they carried out Ms. V.



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The authors collaborated on "Friend," (January 1984). This new story concerns a man who awakens with limited memory in a strange sort of resort that seems to be founded on amnesia.

Freedom Beach

BY

JOHN KESSEL and JAMES PATRICK KELLY

It was a queer dream. Carl swam across the sky; the chill fluid air swirled around him. Far below, screaming crowds plunged into the cracks of a city sidewalk.

He awoke in sunlight. The brightness made him blink in pain. He felt as if an angry carpenter were hammering nails into his head, but he could not remember earning a hangover. A mist swept across his face; he could hear the sound of falling water.

He could not remember last night, last week, the last ten years. He could not remember his father's name. Trying to remember only made his head ache all the worse.

He sat up gingerly. In the center of the sun-splashed atrium was a fountain with a bronze Poseidon astride it; jets of water spurted from his trident. Around the atrium were walls of dark windows shaded by a terra-cotta roof. Carl saw himself in the glass: a man in a strange place wearing nothing but a bewildered expression. He looked pretty fit for someone who could not even remember his father's name.

"Welcome to Freedom Beach," said Poseidon. "You will be sharing this villa with three other guests."

Carl could remember the words to "The Star-Spangled Banner." He understood the difference between *principle* and *principal* and could describe the rules of tennis. He had no idea where he was.

"Yours is the blue suite, to the north. Perhaps you would like to take a few minutes now to inspect your rooms and see if everything is satisfactory?"

Carl waded into the pool. The statue was muscle-bound and larger than life-sized; its dark patina was streaked with jade-colored veins. Carl could see

a microphone wedged into its sneer and the faceted sensors in its eyes. "What is this place? Why am I here?"

"Welcome to Freedom Beach." The voice was deep, masculine and on the verge of laughter.

"Who's in charge here? I want to talk to someone in charge. Where are you?"

"Eighty-seven centimeters north-northwest of you. I dare say I am difficult to miss, Carl."

Carl scooped several handfuls of water at the statue's face. If there were a short, someone might come to fix it.

"Your neighbors are out," said Poseidon, "but should be returning before lunch. Would you like to inspect your rooms?"

History, thought Carl in a flash of inspiration. Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison ... Reagan. He had written a report on the old actor for Sister Agnes in the sixth grade at St. Elizabeth's Elementary in Kansas City. After Reagan — nothing.

He splashed out of the pool and crossed the atrium to the blue door. His rooms were large, functional, and unrelentingly bland. He found a king-sized waterbed and a bathroom with a shower — no tub. The closet doors were mirrored; behind them was the menswear department of a small sporting-goods store. Sky-blue sweat suits, jerseys, trunks, jocks, headbands, wristbands, knee braces, running shoes, and sneakers. Thirty pairs of white socks. The living room had a beige modular couch, a chrome-and-glass coffee table, and a small built-in refrigerator filled with fruit and juice. The front door opened onto a sunny, cobbled, and deserted street. He returned to the bedroom and dressed.

Most of the buildings of Freedom Beach clung to the flanks of a landscaped hill. The beach below was as white as spindrift. Carl thought he saw a blue smudge of land on the horizon. He definitely saw people on the beach, and he started down to them. He counted seven pastel stucco villas like his own nestled amidst the palms and tree ferns and broadleaf evergreens. He stopped counting statues; every corner had its god, saint, king or hero. All had insect eyes and the glint of metal between pursed lips.

On the flat between the hill and the beach was a boggling array of playing fields and courts. A larger version of the villas was surrounded by patio furniture. Beyond were the people he had seen from above: eleven of them, playing volleyball on the sand, laughing, shouting, naked. Carl paused, hiding behind a sleek monument of black marble. He was afraid of what these people might tell him of himself. He closed his eyes, pressed himself against the cold marble, and tried one last time to punch through the pain to his lost memory.

"Hey you! New arrival!"

The game stopped; the players stared at him.

"Come on; we're short one."

He stepped from behind the monument and for the first time saw the words engraved on its seaward face.

YOU CAME TO FREEDOM BEACH VOLUNTARILY. PRIOR TO MEMORY EDITING YOU UNDERSTOOD AND AGREED TO THE CONDITIONS OF YOUR STAY HERE. THERE ARE TWO RULES. PLEASE OBEY THEM.

YOU MAY NOT HARM ANOTHER GUEST.

YOU ARE FORBIDDEN TO WRITE.

"But then how did I get here? I don't remember anything."

"Nobody does. That's the point, isn't it?" The woman's name was Myrna. Her hair was red and her tan was a work of art. She made Carl feel embarrassed to be wearing clothes. "Nice save, Jihan. Beautiful!"

They had not even stopped playing long enough to greet him. Myrna had come out of the game to keep him from pestering the others. She and Carl sat on the sidelines in folding beach chairs. She poured herself a drink from what looked like a pitcher of margaritas. His questions fell like stones into a bottomless well.

"You mean there's no one in charge?"

"Not unless you want to be."

"How long have you been here?"

"Lost track."

"You don't even care anymore, do you?"

She smiled and shook her head.

There was sand in his sneakers. "I could use a drink."

"So could I,' said Myrna, "but all we have is lemonade."

Eventually, he entered the game just to escape her; they went to opposite sides of the net. Carl's teammates introduced themselves and placed him in the center back position. "Stay low when Vic's serving," said Akira, who had gray hair and the lean brown body of a miler.

The blond server on Myrna's team palmed the ball, threw it high, and hit it with his arm fully extended. It spun over the net toward Carl. He dropped to his knees and managed to get his wrists under it, but the ball skewed out of play.

"Ten-seven," called Vic.

The next serve shot straight at Carl. This time his return stayed in play, but it was too hard. It soared over the net and deep to Myrna, who set it up for her front line to spike.

"See what she did?" said Akira. "That's what you want to do."

"Yeah, yeah, I know." Carl pulled his sneakers and socks off and slithered out of his shirt.

The ball, unmarred by writing, seemed whiter and harder than any Carl had seen before. Whatever else these people were, they were superb athletes. They concentrated on the game, joked between points, offered advice and encouragement in the manner of old friends. Near the end of the third game of what seemed an unending series, Carl tried to slip in a few questions.

"You're all pretty good at this. Play every day?"

"Judy's good," said Akira, nodding at the woman who had rotated into position next to him. "I'm an old man."

"You weren't an old man last night," said Judy.

"I'm the one playing like an old man," Carl said. "I'm not used to this. How long have you folks been here?"

"Since breakfast." Akira crouched to receive the serve, but it tipped the net.

"Net serve," said Judy. "He means at Freedom Beach. Look — Carl, is it? Look, Carl, I know it must seem important to you now, but after you've been here a few days, the only time that counts is mealtime. Now move so I can serve."

She promptly served out the game, and they decided to play again. "What I don't get," said Carl, "is this business of not writing."

Akira glared at him as if he were a stubborn child. "You have this novel, right? Just bursting inside you?"

Carl felt as if the beach were turning to quicksand beneath him. "You don't care, either. I just don't understand you people. Maybe this sun has boiled your brains."

Although he stood just under two hundred centimeters, Carl had never been much of a leaper. His growing anger at the absurdity of his situation transformed him. He managed to get two hands over the net to block one of Vic's spikes.

"Nice play, nature boy," said Akira, patting him on the rump.

Carl tried the same strategy on the next point, but Vic was ready. He smashed the ball between Carl's arms; it bounced off the bridge of his nose and sent him sprawling.

"You all right, sport?" Vic ducked under the net to help him up.

"Now he's got something to remember," said Myrna, and everyone laughed.

At lunchtime the trash cans came out of the woodwork. As the volleyball players entered the commons, the oak wainscoting folded away from the walls, revealing a dozen cartridge-shaped servomechanisms. Made of burnished metal and standing a meter tall, they tracked through the room on rubber-padded belts, silently taking orders and disgorging food through hatches near the tips of their shiny heads. Except for alcohol, the trash cans would deliver anything a guest ordered; however, the portly plaster Balzac by Rodin that dominated the commons informed Carl that he would be limited to twenty-nine hundred calories a day.

Carl chose to eat by himself next to the statue. He tested the kitchen by ordering a spinach quiche, a cup of cold borsch, and a cherry cola. The trash can scuttled off to its berth and returned minutes later. The food was excellent. As he ate, Carl questioned Bal-

zac. The statue responded politely to all questions but those that most interested Carl; it would say nothing about the origins and purpose of Freedom Beach or about the personal histories of Carl and the thirty-one other guests.

On their way out after lunch, Vic and Myrna invited him to come for a swim. The pool was a marvel, fifty meters long, filled with salt water, and lined with thousands of brightly colored tiles. At one end, set off from the rest of the pool by a transparent wall, an enormous golden statue jutted from the water. Surrounded by monsters and tritons, Apollo stood on a chariot harnessed to four magnificent horses. The piece seemed to be emerging from the water, headed west.

"Is that solid gold?"

"Gilt," said Myrna. "Just like the one at Versailles."

"How do you know that?" Carl was certain that she had made a slip.

"We're not quite as shallow as you think, sport," said Vic. He sat on a beach chair and untied his sneakers. "Everybody has their own little specialty; Myrna like statues."

"What's yours?"

Vic pulled off his shirt. "The boundaries."

"What boundaries?"

He sighed. "This isn't the time — but." He stripped off his shorts, crouched by the side of the pool, and splashed water on himself. "For example, the only swimming you want to do is right here. There are sharks in the ocean and big men-of-war. A coral reef farther out that could cut you to bloody rags. And then there's the current."

"How do you know?"

Vic dove into the water.

"He found out for himself." Myrna gazed at the islands on the horizon.

Now that his headache had subsided. Carl found it difficult to stay angry with these people. They were beautiful, infectiously cheerful and bursting with life. They were not trying to shun him, only waiting for him to learn and observe their rules. When he participated in their impromptu swim meet, they cheered as loudly for him as for anyone. Carl decided to postpone his questions. He even sunbathed in the nude. The monolith said that he had come voluntarily to Freedom Beach. Without knowing his reasons, he could understand why.

After dinner the trash cans passed among the assembled guests, distributing communion. Each received a single white wafer the size of a quarter. Carl hesitated before eating his; Jihan, Chip, Akira, and Myrna—his tablemates—eyed it greedily.

"I'll have it if you don't want it," said Chip with indifference.

"We'll split it four ways," Myrna said firmly.

Carl popped it into his mouth; it tasted of honey. "Don't want to cause trouble."

There followed several minutes of

silence as each guest retreated into his private narcosis. Carl waited in vain for the drug to take effect. Supper was a pleasant weight in his stomach. He could appreciate the sensuous hiss of the surf and the coolness of the salt-laden breeze. A trash can with arms was setting up oil torches on the plaza outside the commons. The flames writhed and glittered. When he shut his eyes the colors still danced on the inside of his lids. Muscles he had never known before relaxed; he felt as if he were melting into the chair. Not rapture — a vast and impenetrable contentment. No more questions need be answered, no motives deduced, no more becoming, nothing better to do than float through the warm oceanic now. ...

Someone on another planet said. "Wake up the new boy."

"Carl." Myrna shook him, laughing. "Carl!"

He opened his eyes and fell in love with the red hair tumbling across her face, the spray of freckles on her cheeks. Though she was wearing a sweat suit against the cool night air, he could still see her on the beach, naked. She was not what men call voluptuous; she was compact, hard, solid. There was a sturdy intelligence written on her features that made her laugh irresistible. He smiled back at her and pulled her into the chair next to him, holding her hand. When she made no effort to withdraw it, Vic wandered over to their table.

"Carl thinks we need a leader, Vic." Myrna feigned concern. "He wants to take command."

"I thought that was your specialty, Vic," said Chip, a short man with a two-day stubble of beard.

"I lead," said Vic, "but no one follows."

"Tell me more about your specialists," Carl said. "What can I do?"

"Specialists," Vic said. "Akira, for example, is our sexualist; that's how his hair turned gray. Jihan is our historian: 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue, and all that. We have storytellers, singers, masseurs, botanists, menu mavens — and of course, champions in every sport.

"And then there's Chip," continued Vic. "His specialty is — what would you call it, sport? Worrying about why we're here?"

"I'm an inductive theoretician," said Chip stiffly. He noticed the smiles and frowned. "Well, at least I can still think about something more important than what kinds of cheese to eat with melon."

"Good for you!" Carl tried to convince himself that Chip was not a jerk. "So tell me, why can't we write?"

Chip held up his index finger. "Simple. We're part of an experiment. If we were to write, it would spoil the results. You need a control to do an experiment, yes?"

"A control?"

Jihan pushed out of her chair and sat on Akira's lap. She looked bored.

"You know, a test group where nothing happens. Somewhere there's another Freedom Beach full of typewriters. They want to see what the other group will come up with when they can't remember anything. No writing for us — we're the control."

A wave formed on Carl's glassy sea of contentment. "Who are *they?*"

"Aliens." Chip had large and very empty blue eyes. "They wiped our memories and brought us to this place. They monitor everything we do. Right now, Carl, every word we say, they hear."

Carl was not sure whether the derision he detected on the others' faces was directed at him or Chip or both of them. "But if you know that we're part of the experiment, and they're listening and know you know, then another variable has been introduced into the control group, and the experiment is wrecked. But they haven't called it off. Therefore you must be wrong."

Everyone laughed but Chip. Once the giggles stopped he was ready with an answer. "You forget that if they call off the experiment, they would be admitting to me that this is an experiment, so the only way they can keep the experiment going is not to call it off, in the hope by their not calling it off, I'll be convinced eventually that it must not be an experiment after all."

Akira removed his hands from beneath Jihan's sweat shirt and clapped. "Bravo, Socrates, bravo! Thus do we see how the weaker argument defeats the stronger."

"Poor Chip. You just don't get it, do you?" Myrna freed her hand from Carl's sweaty grasp. "This place is too pointless to be an experiment."

Jihan nuzzled Akira and said in a throaty whisper, "Maybe we all died and went to heaven."

"Did you ever hear any description of heaven that made it sound like an interesting place?" Myrna pulled the hair back from her face. "We have all the time we want, nobody gets sick — unless they get sick of Chip's nattering — the food is great, the weather perfect, there are enough games to keep us from thinking. Even the sex is pretty good."

Carl could not help thinking of the grim nuns at St. Elizabeth's. "Sex in heaven?"

"Sex in heaven," said Akira, dumping Jihan from his lap. She slid to the ground with an outraged squawk; they both laughed. "And on that note, we bid you adieu. Coming, my sweet?" He helped Jihan up, and they went off arm in arm.

"So you really think we're dead?" Carl hugged Myrna abruptly. "Your corpse is still warm."

"Not dead, no! We would know — I would — if I had died." She was no longer bantering; her wild sincerity lanced through the chemical fog in his brain. "That's the lie they've spread about heaven: in order to get there you have to die, give up life and everything that made it worth living. Heaven makes sense only if you're alive to en-

joy it, letting it fill your senses. Not the end of life, an intensification of it. The amnesia we've got is the proprietor's way of purifying us so we're ready to accept heaven. Otherwise, we'd have to fight the lie before we could enjoy this place, and that would screw everything up."

Chip caught Carl's attention and made a smug face.

"When did you decide all this, Myrna?" Vic seemed puzzled. "You've called this place a lot of things — never heaven."

"I don't know — today, yesterday, maybe just now." Carl felt her shiver in his embrace. "I was fooled before because there were no angels, no St. Peter at the gates to keep the assholes out."

"What about your proprietor? The guy in charge?" Carl grinned. "Where's God?"

"He's back at the lab," said Chip, "with the other delusions."

"Dear, sweet Chip," replied Myrna. "Go screw." She twisted free of Carl and ran from the commons.

Chip watched her go, then excused himself and slunk into the night. Carl thought he might still catch up to her until Vic sat next to him.

"Stay a minute, sport. You were teasing."

"I didn't know. I thought she was serious."

Vic appraised him coolly. "She was."

Carl stared at nothing.

"Forget about whether this is heaven. That's not the point. The point is that we're all trying to come to an understanding of this place. Some belief — even if it's a lie — that helps us keep going. You don't mess with that, sport. Not ever. Chip was just playing, but she was serious. That's why we don't discuss these things."

"How existential of you." Carl tried to conceal his embarrassment.

"Maybe you are an ass." Vic shrugged. "You can think whatever you want. You can think we're a bunch of fools, and you wouldn't be the first who thought that. But don't think that anyone here will respect you for being independent. It's just another delusion, sport. Because whatever else it is, Freedom Beach is a prison."

Carl stood. He did not want to antagonize Vic, he did not want to apologize.

"You win the prize tonight." Vic clapped him on the shoulder as if in congratulation. "She's your neighbor, green suite. 'Night."

Carl walked along the beach, listening to the surf, thinking. Then he went directly to his rooms, had two glasses of orange juice, and dropped his clothes in piles on the floor. The warm waterbed shivered like jello as he climbed into it. The events of the day spun through his mind, more and more slowly, like a merry-go-round coming to a stop.

Someone screamed.

He bolted through the door into the

atrium. The fountain splashed. Then the screaming started again and did not stop. "Help! Oh my God, help me!"

She was on the floor, naked, writhing. The pale green sheets trailed off her waterbed. He knelt by her side, comforting and at the same time restraining her. Finally, she subsided into tears.

"Are you all right?"

She swallowed. "Nightmare." She brushed her wet face against his chest, and he rocked her in silence for a time.

She breathed in deeply and let out a strangled little laugh. "Did you ever..." She took another breath. "What kind of death frightens you the most?"

Carl did not want to take the question seriously, but he dared not make a joke. "I don't know." He considered. "When I was a boy I stepped into a bee's nest. I remember running, but they had flown inside my clothes. I was in the hospital for a month. But I'd go crazy long before they could sting me to death."

She put her arms around him. "I was sailing with my brother. The boat tipped, he drowned. I should have to. Then I wouldn't have these nightmares."

He kissed her tentatively, then with purpose.

"This is serious," she said.

"Yes."

They fell into bed, and Myrna took him with a kind of desperate earnestness. She knew what she wanted, and when she had it she laughed. "Now you've done everything there is to do here." She fell asleep first, draped over him as if they had been murdered together. Carl drifted to the edge of consciousness. Someone far away was laughing, and he remembered that his father's name was Harry.

Carl decided that for the present he would accept Freedom Beach as he found it. He saw no purpose in making enemies when he had yet to make up his mind, so he gathered with everyone else each morning on the lawn by Discobolus's shed. There the bronze statue would tell them what to play that day. Discobolus's word was not law; one day when he offered nothing but hickory crosses and hard rubber lacrosse balls, most guests spent the day at tag and hide-and-go-seek. Those who felt ridiculous kept it to themselves.

He kept waiting for something to happen, for the reason for his being there to come clear. He tried to keep track of time. He stole a knife from the commons and carved notches on the inside of his closet door molding. He got up to sixteen before they disappeared. Then he collected pebbles in a sock he hid beneath the skirt of a petticoat palm. When he returned one day the entire plant had been replaced by a cigar store Indian.

"Why bother?" it said.

There were no monogamous relationships at Freedom Beach. Carl sampled bodies and offered his own freely,

but his preference was for Myrna. Their lovemaking was never spectacular; it was the before and after that attracted Carl to her. Occasionally he was able to bore through the defensive taunts, the cynicism, and the anger to the core of her tortured honesty. Late at night amid the scattered blankets, as the sweat dried on them and carried with it the false euphoria of communion, they shared their fears of the awful silliness of their lives. It was on one such night, weeks after he had arrived, that he got her to answer the question that no one else would.

"Do we ever get to leave?"

"Leave heaven? What for?" She rolled to the edge of the bed and sat hostilely with her back to him. "Ask someone else. Vic would tell you, if you'd stop spitting in his face first."

"I'm not asking Vic for a goddamned thing. Someday he's going to have to come to me." He skimmed his forefinger down her vertebrae. "I'm asking you because you're the only one I can ask."

"Damn you." She was silent for a time. "A few have tried to escape. Some made it back — Vic did." She stooped to gather her clothes. "Then there are the rule-breakers. Our benevolent proprietor withholds communion as a punishment. You're addicted, you know." She chuckled bitterly at his shock. "If it's only a day or two, you recover. But after a week ... some take the long swim. Others disappear into the boundaries."

"They die?"

She slipped into her T-shirt. "Maybe. Probably. But the beauty of it is that we've never found a single body. Only...." She pulled on her shorts and stepped into her sandals. "Have you seen the sphinx yet? The alumni?"

"No. Where?"

"You're overdue, sport. Walk west along the beach as far as you can go. Oh, and by the way" — she opened the door to the atrium — "I'm not sleeping with you anymore. You ask too damn many questions."

The tide narrowed the beach until Carl was skirting the verge of a precipitous jungle and clambering over fallen trees awash in the surf. He was beginning to suspect that Myrna had tricked him when he came upon the stone stairway cut into one side of the hill. It climbed steeply and then descended to a wide prospect on which crouched the Great Sphinx of Giza.

It was some nineteen meters tall and seventy meters long and was covered with brightly painted plaster. Sensors the size of road-grader wheels stared at the hazy islands on the horizon; the face was unmarked by time or Turkish bullets. The sphinx loomed between Carl and a statue garden at the far side of its park.

"Good afternoon, Carl." It had the voice of Niagara Falls.

He staggered. "Lower. Please."

"How's this?" It boomed.

"Will you answer questions?"

"Ask."

Carl sat cross-legged on the bottom step. "What is it that goes on four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon and three legs in the evening?"

"A man."

"Tell me how you knew the answer."

"You are not the first to ask."

"Did you read about it?"

"I do not read. I know."

"Does that mean you can't read?"

"A meaningless question. Since there is nothing for me to read here, the occasion does not arise."

"Suppose I were to write a note and hold it up to your sensors?"

"With what?"

"I could slash my wrists and write in blood on the stones."

"Why bother? Talking is less messy."

Carl strolled between the massive paws as he marshaled his thoughts for another round. "Some things can be expressed only in writing."

"I find that hard to believe."

"Poetry."

"Comes from an oral tradition."

"Some things are too painful...." Carl was getting hungry; he was already hot. "I would find it hard to say that I was ashamed of myself, for instance."

"Why?"

Carl knew he was losing the advantage again. Yet the question demanded an answer. "If I wrote, I wouldn't have to face the person I was telling it to."

"Again, why bother?" said the sphinx. "It is my observation that people are not generally interested in the problems of others."

"You're wrong! Maybe not around here; you've seen to that with your drugs and your pointless games. But there are other places."

"Things were different where you came from."

Carl realized that he had scored a point; this was the first hint that the statues came from someplace else. "I don't remember! You took that away from me!"

"Nothing has been taken that you did not surrender voluntarily."

"How do I know?"

"Why would I lie?"

"Fuck you." He picked up a stone and hurled it at one of the sensors; it bounced away harmlessly.

"That is not an option of which I am capable."

"Fuck you, anyway."

"There is no content in your response."

Carl restrained himself from throwing another rock. Instead, he nodded grimly. "Your round." He circled behind the statue toward the group of statues Myrna had called the alumni. "I want to leave this place."

"Where do you want to go?"

"Send me back to where I was before I came here."

"Where was that?"

He smiled humorously. "All right. I'll settle for those islands over there."

"There are no islands."

Carl paused and squinted at the islands. From this vantage he could count four. They were all mountainous; the largest was mottled with eggshell patches as if there were dunes or chalk cliffs along its coasts.

"No islands! Straight ahead — you're staring at them!"

"You mean the mirage."

"The what?"

"The optical illusion resulting when light from a distant object is bent as it passes through the interface of air layers of varying density."

"I don't believe you."

Silence.

"The jungle then," said Carl. "What's on the other side of the jungle?"

"There is no other side. The jungle is endless."

By this time he was close enough to count the twelve pieces in the statue garden. None had the usual sensors and microphones. All were captured in their death throes. Aghast, Carl reeled from agony to agony. He had once seen the castings made by pouring plaster into the hollows left by Pompeian corpses buried beneath the hot ash of Vesuvius. These were far more terrible in their detail; the silent screams, madness and despair on grotesque faces.

"Who ... ?"

The sphinx said, "They, too, chose not to believe."

* * *

Carl stopped going to morning assembly; he did not participate in the games. He saw the other guests at meals and was not unfriendly, but their chatter of strikes and backhands and caroms and grips soon bored him. He wanted to talk to Myrna about the sphinx and the alumni, but she would hear nothing from him. Perhaps he had given her more credit than she deserved; perhaps she was as afraid as the rest of them. During the day Carl would stay in bed or sit alone on the beach. At night he would savor communion, take a lover or not, think his thoughts.

YOU MAY NOT HARM ANOTHER GUEST. Yes, of course. A simple law that humans had always found complicated reasons for breaking. Food, shelter, and the Golden Rule; these should have been the ingredients for paradise. And yet, YOU ARE FORBIDDEN TO WRITE. Writing was a kind of memory, and Freedom Beach was founded on amnesia. Writing was the key to change, and Freedom Beach was petrified. Writing was the quintessence of culture, Freedom Beach was a game of tag.

Chip was growing a beard. It was sparse and uneven in color, but he was the only guest with one. A poor athlete, he lusted after distinction. On an occasional afternoon he, too, would leave the games and visit Carl. Together they would puzzle over their fate. Chip's latest theory was that all the guests were writers and Freedom

Beach was some exotic kind of cure.

"And all the statues are shrinks." He snuggled his toes into the hot sand of the beach.

"Then this place must really cost." Carl watched some guests playing tag football at the edge of the surf. "If I'm not a best seller, I'd hate to have to pay the bill."

"Well, if you are, I must be."

Carl was still deciding about Chip; the ideas were interesting, the mind insufferable. "What about the alumni? Dead patients might put a damper on business."

"They're not dead, they're cured. They had such a burning need to write that they risked death to do it. The proprietor let them go."

"But what are we supposed to be cured of?" Carl mused.

"Unhappiness." An errant pass bounced nearby and rolled toward them. Chip retrieved it and threw a wobbling ball to the nearest player. "We were all rich and famous, see, and busy drinking ourselves to death, doing heavy drugs, sticking pistols into our mouths for fun. We got so desperate that we signed on here. You see, some of us were meant to be writers and some of us just drifted into it. Now the real writers go back to the real world and the rest of us work on our tans."

Carl considered for a moment, and then for the first time he broke one of the rules. BULLSHIT, he wrote in the sand. He looked at Chip.

"Hey, man. What are you doing?" Chip rubbed out the word with his foot and glanced nervously at the players. No one had noticed. "I'll be seeing you, O.K.?" He trotted over to the game.

The gazebo was under seige from the jungle behind it; vines snaked up its corner posts and overran the roof. Inside was a water bubbler and a bronze by Picasso called *Baboon and Young.* The head of the parent was a toy car with windshield eyes and a bumper mouth.

"I'm going into the jungle." Carl stooped over the bubbler and drank. "What will I find there?"

"You will find that you are lost soon enough."

He patted the baboon on the hood. "Well, if anyone asks, you know where to find me."

The bravado lasted fifty meters. To be sure that he was not going in circles he tried the old Boy Scout trick of walking to landmarks and then sighting back to the previous mark.

But marks were hard to spot as he picked his way through the dense underbrush. He was ill-prepared for a long trek; he should have squirreled away some provisions, perhaps stolen a fencing foil from Discobolus to hack at the jungle. But he was resolved at least to explore the boundaries of Freedom Beach, if not to cross them.

Carl rested against the bole of a tree and swiped at the cloud of flies around

his face. He had no idea what time of day it was; the treetops hid the sun. He had been walking long enough to be thirsty. Maybe he should climb a tree. He licked his lips. Check his progress. He tried to shinny up several of the branchless trunks. The farthest he got was ten meters off the ground, a third of the way to the canopy. He stopped climbing and clung, wrenched by acrophobia. He was slipping. The rough bark tore at his hands. He fell the last few meters, struggled up completely lost, and stepped into a bee's nest. When he flailed at the swarm, the jungle slapped back. He ran.

Carl burst through one last wall of green and saw the roofs of Freedom Beach. Flying down the cobbled street, he realized that he had outrun the bees, had not even been stung. He did not slow down. At the edge of the pool he dived and stayed under as long as he could. He surfaced in front of three impatient swimmers waiting on the starting blocks.

"You about done, sport?" Vic stooped and offered a helping hand.

"Yeah, get him out of there."

Carl glared at them. "I went ..." He breathed deeply. "I went for a walk. In the jungle."

They laughed at him.

"You can't get out that way." Vic boosted him onto the side of the pool. "The jungle is full of boogeymen. You should have asked me."

"Time to stop acting like a rookie." Akira offered a dry towel. "We've got a new arrival."

"Where?" Carl asked, still slightly dazed.

"He wandered into the commons a while ago, asking the usual questions."

"Where is he now?"

The swimmers were silent for a moment.

"I think someone took him into the clubhouse," said Akira. "He'll be out soon enough."

"They're in the tub," another said. "Akira, don't tell me you're turning prude."

Akira touched Carl's arm. "Let's eat something. I wanted to change into some dry clothes, anyway."

"I'm not hungry."

"Forget it, Akira," Vic said. "Carl, if you weren't so damned stupid, you'd let someone do you a favor."

"Myrna's introducing him," Akira said quietly.

"He didn't seem to need much introducing," Jihan said. Everyone laughed.

"I just had some questions." Carl was angry at himself for being embarrassed. "They can wait."

"Myrna couldn't." They laughed again.

When Myrna and the newcomer — Rick — showed up later, Carl did not have any questions. Myrna looked haggard; she would not meet his gaze.

Carl had decided. After breakfast each morning he went straight to the pool and swam laps. He made his tuck

turns without touching the sides. After lunch he napped, then back to the pool.

Soon he was logging as much as six kilometers at a stretch. He swam like a machine; once he had established his rhythm, his thoughts slowed to the ticking off of laps. Balzac told him that his caloric maximum was being raised to four thousand, then to forty-five hundred.

In addition, Carl steadily — and surreptitiously — cut down on his intake of communion. Each night he nipped the wafer with his fingernail and discarded as much as he dared. The first time proved a disaster when he stashed the leftover in the pocket of his tennis shorts. When he realized that the lesser dose would leave him far, far short of his accustomed euphoria, he retreated to the bathroom, turned the pocket inside out, and ate the dregs; lint, crumbs, and all. The next time he flushed the shard before the drug could wear down his resolve.

Each night he ate less, until he was throwing away half, occasionally more. Over the long term, detoxification was easier than he had expected. He ached from the workouts, anyway, and he was so tired that insomnia never became a problem. He managed to keep his withdrawal a secret from the others.

Confidence swelling, he switched the afternoon workout to the ocean. His first attempt was almost his last. The waves disrupted his breathing; he swallowed enough water to fill an aquarium. Without lane markers to guide him, he had to lift his head high above the waves. The salt water corroded his vision until he saw everything through a tunnel of haze. When he collected his first jellyfish sting, an ugly ten-centimeter welt on his calf, he limped to shore and collapsed.

But he came back the next afternoon, and the afternoon after that, and soon he had adjusted to the rigors of open-water swimming. Eventually, he tried to swim while wearing his lightest pair of jogging shoes. The next step was to reach the coral reef that Vic had mentioned. With his feet protected he was able to walk across it safely. He stood in water up to his chest with waves slapping at his face and gazed at the islands. They looked closer — and realer — than he would have imagined from the beach. He guessed that he was about a third of the way to escape.

Then he saw the fin slicing through the water. He had a glimpse of the sleek, dark body. Carl stood dead still, mouth open, gulping air to quench his fear. He told himself that it was probably only a hallucination like the bees, part of the psychic fence that locked the guests in. But the jellyfish welt, burning on his leg from the salt water, was real. He reminded himself that there were only a few species of shark that could kill a man. Yet in Carl's imagination the dark shape out there was deliberately stalking him. It circled him and then disappeared beneath the

waves. Carl was shivering so badly that it was hard to keep his balance. Nothing happened. He started counting. One-one thousand, two-one thousand, three.... In time he realized that he had been reprieved. It was a bitter comfort, for now he knew that he would never muster the nerve to reach for the islands. He walked back across the reef and struck out for shore.

He wanted to tell Myrna that he had surrendered to Freedom Beach; of all guests, she was the only one he thought might be disappointed. But she skipped supper that night and made only the briefest of appearances during communion. She had lost weight, and she shuffled through the commons listlessly.

"What's with her?" he asked Akira.

"Don't you know?" He shrugged. "We haven't seen much of Myrna recently. We thought you two might be hermitting together."

"I thought she was spending her time with the new guy."

Akira was surprised at his ignorance. "That didn't last past the introduction."

"She looks awful."

He returned to his rooms. On his bed he found a rolled-up white towel. He shook it open. Someone had written on it in what looked like grape juice. The letters were twisted and barely legible; they were beautiful.

I feel light as a handful of air,
My moonbeam bones frame sea mist,
I am nothing but glitter and the tang of salt.
Tie me down! Chain me to these slippery stones.
The cry of a passing gull could carry me off,
Scatter me like rain across the water.
The waves sigh as they lap at the beach.
They say there is no place but this.
I will breathe deeply of night and the stars,
Break this leash of reason,
Shed this harness of appetite
And yield, unbodied, to the tide.

Carl was stunned with delight. He laughed and danced around the bed, never once taking his eyes from the words. There was someone else! Thinking he knew who it was, he ran to the door of the green suite. He knocked, then pounded; he called Myrna. No response.

It did not matter whether he saw her then or later. Or whether she had written the poem at all. Whoever it was, yes, even if it were Chip, that person had earned his love. He spent the evening in his room with the door locked, memorizing the words, speaking them aloud. Writing was not the only freedom that the proprietor had revoked; Carl wondered if reading might not be the greater loss. It took a long time for Carl to bring himself to destroy the towel and protect

his unknown friend.

The next morning, after searching unsuccessfully for Myrna, Carl went back to the pool. Instead of swimming laps, he floated on his back beneath the golden statue, watching the clouds. All that day he waited for a sign from the poet. At times he felt that he would burst with his secret, yet no knowing eyes met his.

He finally found Myrna picking at her supper. Throughout the meal he tried to attract her attention; she ignored him sullenly. He had begun to think he was wrong about her, when the trash cans distributing communion quietly passed her by.

"Give it to me! You tin bastard!" she cried. She picked up a glass and hurled it at the offending trash can. "Give it!"

The assembled guests seethed with whispered horror. All but Carl gobbled their communion wafers as soon as they received them.

"What did I do?" Myrna staggered from table to table in search of help; her friends shrank from her. "It's a mistake." Fear disfigured her face. "No. Do you hear? No, listen to me!" She spied Chip receiving one of the last wafers and lurched toward him. "Give it to me, Chip, it's mine. Come on, Chip. They'll give you another. Chip!" As he stuffed it into his mouth, she lunged. He pushed out his chair and blocked her with his forearm. She grunted and sprawled across the table, which tipped her to the floor. She lay amid the cutlery and broken dishes and beads of her own blood. "A mistake, a mistake."

Vic and Carl ran to her from opposite sides of the commons. Vic arrived first and crouched by her. "All right Myrna. It's all right." He slipped an arm around her shoulder and sat her up. "We'll go home and clean you up. There's nothing we can do here."

"Get away from her." Carl knocked him backward. Vic vaulted to his feet, ready to fight. "What were you going to do, big man?" said Carl. "Take her away so the rest of us won't have to watch her suffer?"

He held up his communion for all to see. Vic's fists dropped to his sides. Myrna fixed the wafer with a glistening stare and coiled herself like a snake about to strike. Carl broke it in half and was about to offer her part when she sprang. Surprise sent him reeling. He dropped Myrna's piece and she pounced on it.

"It's not enough, Carl." Vic waved off the other guests. "For either of you."

Carl hauled Myrna to her feet roughly. "Go," he said, propelling her toward the door.

"I'm sorry." She made it seem like a confession obtained under torture. Carl cleaned the cuts on her knees in silence. He tossed the bloody washcloth into the sink and sat at the edge of her bed.

"Vic is right, you know." She seemed to be looking right through the ceiling.

"I liked your poem."

She laughed; nothing moved but her mouth.

"I wanted to see you the other night. I knocked, you didn't answer." He touched her motionless hand. "They say you've become a recluse."

"I've been purifying the flesh. You know, clear the mind, dull the senses."

"You're starving yourself to death."

"That's one theory."

He grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. "You listen! From now on we share communion. You're going to eat if I have to force it down your throat. And you're going to train with me until you're ready to swim to the islands." She looked at him blankly. "Listen! Suicide is the coward's way. You and I are going to fight this place."

"You're wrong." For the first time she seemed to be in the same room with him. "You have to be brave to try to kill yourself. Or crazy. Neither applies to me. I just wanted to slip in through the back door."

He let her fall back onto the bed. His head was throbbing and he wished he had kept a larger portion of the communion wafer for himself.

She opened her arms and smiled wanly. "Make love to me."

Carl embraced her with the certainty that he alone could save her. But after an hour of sweaty frustration he realized that she did not seek pleasure or affection from him but merely escape. When she opened herself to him she was no longer able to repress her withdrawal pangs. After Carl gave up, she twisted and flopped on the bed like a fish suffocating on a hot, wooden deck. Eventually, he was driven to the couch in the living room to sleep.

"Wake up, damn you!"

Carl squinted at his tormentor. "Scram."

Vic would not be refused; he jiggled Carl's shoulder. "Listen to me. Please."

Groggy as he was, Carl recognized something in Vic's voice he had never heard before. "Myrna?" He propped himself up against the side cushion of the couch.

"Gone." Vic averted his gaze and retreated a few steps as if to avoid giving offense. "Are you awake?"

Carl scratched his head and nodded.

"The statues don't like what you did last night. Most of them have stopped talking. Discobolus refused to issue any equipment this morning. And Balzac...." He drew a ragged breath. "Balzac says that unless you agree not to share with Myrna again, there will be no more communion. For anyone! You understand?"

For a few seconds each contemplated the possibilities of a dark night of riot and madness.

Carl rose stiffly from the couch and took a half-full liter of grapefruit juice

from Myrna's refrigerator. "So you're here to ask me not to save her." He drained the bottle and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Did you appoint yourself or did the others elect you?"

Vic frowned. "It's the same for her either way. She knows. She came down for breakfast this morning, just like old times. She heard what we heard. She left ... we thought she would be here."

"It stinks!" Carl slammed the bottle down so hard that it broke. "You stink."

"She always said that you wanted to be in charge." Vic picked up the sharpest shard of glass, turned it in his hand, set it down again. "The job is yours; no sense bitching about your choices."

"What choices?" Carl shook his head grimly. "She's worth more than the whole mindless, gutless, heartless lot of you." He slumped, covering his face with his hands. "Find her. Let that be your game for today, Vic. Hide-and-go-seek. I'll think while you look."

Vic flushed. He started to leave, stopped, started again. Finally, at the door, he turned. "All right. You're the hero, the rest of us are stinking nobodies. But that doesn't give you the right to destroy us like you destroyed her."

"I destroyed...?"

"You shattered her indifference. You can't feel anything and survive here."

One by one the searchers straggled into the commons. The tables farthest from Carl filled first. Carl could not find it in himself to hate them, but they did not destroy his pity. He let them worry.

Vic was one of the last. He did not slink past Carl, but rather approached with an air of doomed bravado. "No luck, sport. She knows how to hide."

"Go away."

Vic pulled out a chair and sat at Carl's table. "Let's eat," he said loudly enough for all to hear. "No sense going to hell on an empty stomach."

The trash cans scuttled out of the wainscoting, but the voice of Balzac stopped them. "Carl, will there be communion tonight?"

The silence was complete.

"That's your decision," muttered Carl. "Your game. Your prize."

"Will there be communion?"

Akira and Jihan burst into the commons, their faces alight with horror.

Carl moaned. He wanted to run away before they could deliver their unspeakable news. "For some," he whispered.

The water spurting from the Poseidon fountain was pink. There was a trail of sticky spatters that looked like cocoa trailing across the atrium; she had come from Carl's apartment. Her naked body was the color of Carraran marble. Slumped at the sea-god's feet, it looked like some ghastly revision to the fountain's centerpiece. Water from the pool licked at the wounds on Myrna's wrists.

Carl wept.

"There's this." Someone pressed a folded pillowcase on Carl and backed away quickly, as if it were infected with the germs of self-destruction. Carl opened it. It was hard to decipher for all the gore.

Afraid of drowning not dying
see you (illegible) islands.

Akira touched him on the arm as if to comfort him, and Carl raised the pillowcase in his clenched fist. It was all he could do to keep from striking Akira. The other guests recoiled.

"It was what she wanted." Vic was crying, too.

Carl took a step toward him.

"You may not harm another guest," said Poseidon.

In a rage Carl splashed into the fountain. He pulled the body from the water and laid it on the flagstones. Then he attacked the statue, tugging at the trident and managing to bend it a few centimeters. The bloody water soaked his clothes. "She didn't harm anyone," he gasped. "It was only a poem."

Poseidon did not reply. Some of the guests were already rushing back to the commons to get their communion. Carl knelt beside Myrna and kissed her cold cheek. "I'm sorry," he said. Then he picked up the pillowcase and pushed through those remaining.

"Where are you going?" called Poseidon from behind him.

Carl carried the pillowcase down the hill. A madonna and child beside the cobbled street called to him. "Where, Carl?"

He reached the beach. On his hands and knees he began to dig. Akira and Vic had followed him; they watched silently. With the sphinx's great voice, Balzac called to him from the commons. "There is nowhere else, Carl."

Carl buried the pillowcase and then wrote with his fist in the sand: MYRNA.

He turned and strode into the surf without looking back.



Reid Collins wrote "Song From the Triad Galaxy," (September 1983). His latest is a touching story about an old man and a dark, hard winter....

Great Speckle Bird

BY
REID COLLINS

Their father stomped his boots in the back entry, sounding much like the pony in his stall and sounding even more like him when he wheezed and blew his nose and came a-steam into the kitchen.

"Did it start?" their mother asked.

"Started," he said and threw back his jacket as he sat once more. She served him two more eggs and more hash browns, and he ate silently, his hands red from the cold and splotched with gnarls from his work.

"He's comin' down?" he said finally.

"I heard him getting up, getting water."

The children looked at one another, swung their legs under their chairs, and communicated in silence.

"I know—" she began.

"He done it again last night, Marge. Done it again, and it was fifteen below." He poked his fork in the direction of the window. "That tank can't take it."

"Propane's expensive," she said. "I know, but—" She nodded toward the children.

"We gotta talk about it."

"Tonight, Tom, I promise. I'll call Marlene today."

"Your sister don't figure in this, unless she wants to take him."

"Well, she does pay."

"Fifteen dollars a month. He run that out in propane last night. And, you know—" His upward glance caught her nodding toward the children. He paused, but continued: "It don't matter. We gotta talk about it."

"Will you be home for lunch?"

"In that? Hell, no. Be lucky to get home for supper."

Snow was falling faster and slanting farther until the barn had become

like a matted photo in the window and began to fade altogether.

"I'll get 'em down to the bus stop," he said. "But they'll have to wait on it. You ready?"

The children slid from their chairs at the table, and she helped them into coats and galoshes. She wrapped a red woolen muffler four times around the girl, tucked in the boy's scarf.

"Will they be all right? It's early."

"They'll have to wait there at the stop's all. Stay in the shelter, out of the wind, and wait." He was looking at them to make certain they understood.

A final time he looked at his wife. "We got work stacked up all around the shop. I got to hit the main road before they plow me in."

They were about to embark when the girl said, "Lemme say 'bye to Grandpa." In the doorway to the kitchen stood an old man. He had shaved in the manner of aging men, leaving spotty patches of white stubble in inaccessible places. His china blue eyes brimmed in water beneath a sparse shock of white, childlike hair.

"Father," she said, stepping toward him, "they are just leaving. Your breakfast will be ready—"

The girl ran toward him and hugged his waist. She looked up at his face. "Did it come again?"

He bent toward her, opened his mouth, and nodded.

"Now, you'll be late. Your father may be plowed in on the main road. So hurry."

As they moved toward the back door and hunched their shoulders for the cold, he said to her, "Call Marlene."

She listened to the truck whining down the drive and heard it shift and spin as it climbed onto the access road that led to their place. When it was gone she made her father eggs over easy and well-buttered toast and poured him coffee.

He was wearing his shoes and trousers but had not put on a shirt, and his suspenders were dark bands against the gray of his long underwear. He ate carefully, dabbed frequently at the stubble on his chin. She sat beside him. "The barn," she said. "You can hardly see the barn for the snow."

He nodded and blinked at the diffused light that played on them from the window. His was the ineffable sadness of a man who had outlived his sons, had seen his daughters go to other men, with one of whom he now lived.

"Dad," she said. "Please don't do that anymore, open your window at night. And don't — well, not in front of Tom — tell the children any more stories about that — that bird."

He turned toward her and said, "It came."

"Dad," she said. She put her hand on the sleeve of his underwear. "Can't it come with the window shut? Surely it can, can't it?"

He looked down at his plate.

"Dad, when you open your win-

dow at night, the thermostat turns the heat on. Besides that, you'll catch pneumonia. You can't stand—"

"Margery," he said. "It sang to me last night. First time."

She sat in silence. There was no use in disputing with her father. She remembered his little flights of fancy even when she was young, her mother's mock disapproval when she heard him telling stories — of the bears that used to roam the riverbanks, of the time the Indians left the reservation and stole blankets from the line and refused to give them back, clutching them tightly around their bodies and shivering to indicate their need. And of a great speckled bird, celebrated in songs played once at the Grange Hall dances, of a time to come. She remembered also the disasters that mounted — the farm's loss, her mother's slow decline in the county hospital, her brother lost in the war, and the other brother killed under unclear circumstances in a suburb of Chicago.

She touched his sleeve once more. "Dad, you must stop this. Promise me."

He reached with his hand and put its blue-veined flesh upon her arm and squeezed.

She broke through the bank of snow piled in the eddy of the house and fed the chickens, making certain the heater bolt kept their water thawed. She drew down some hay for the pony, whose liquid eye regarded her through his nostril steam. She beat her gloved hands together and staggered back to the house where there would be laundry to do after the morning dishes. She allowed her father to stand beside her at the sink, a dish towel in his hand. Lost in time, he did not move, so she ran hot water over the cups and plates and left them to dry by themselves.

He followed her into the living room, where she adjusted the afghan on the back of the sofa. He sat, and she switched on the television set to the only channel that came in clearly, the Fargo station.

It was a game show in reruns, and she knew that the black woman with the amulet on her sateen blouse would win and the young girl with long hair would lose. As the young girl pushed her face into her hands and whirled in anguish, she turned and asked, "Dad. How are you feeling?"

Recalled from a far place, the old man turned to look at her, and he said, "Yes."

The morning passed with the washing machine and dryer running in the shed and she making swift dashes into the poorly heated area to return clothes to the kitchen for folding. He was asleep on the sofa by now. Folding sheets, she realized suddenly that it was not the barn she saw through the window, but the remembrance of the barn, its true being obliterated by the heavy fall of snow that came diagonally across the window. They would have called from the machine shop in

town had Tom not made it onto the main highway before the plow. So he was there, welding on the cold, oily concrete floor, his helmet down, working great seams of metal onto hitches and drawbars, and cursing when a piece of equipment would slip and peel more bark from his hands. She should call Marlene. She should. Marlene would think they wanted more money, might offer five dollars more a month after suggesting that what she really had called for was to get her assent to put their father in the county home, and how could she expect a thing like that? Would she expect a thing like that? Marlene would say again that they would take him if only they had the room.

The midday market report drifted from the TV box in the living room. Chicago futures. Was there a future in Chicago? Her brother had not found it so. In his casket they had powdered and waxed the claw-hammer marks at his temples. The powder flew against the window and drifted in the casement corners. *Dark, hard winter.* That was a winter wheat, she knew now, but as a child she would shudder when the radio mentioned dark, hard winter. Outside, the day had lost hours, was illuminated only by a pale, wavering light. Indoors, the time was marked in thirty-minute segments by the television set before which her father slept.

She prepared a stew for supper, and set the table and wondered if she should try to make it down to the access road to usher the children up to the house. They were hardy, rural-wise. Surely Tom loved them or would not have gotten the pony. Yet there was a void between them. It was the work. Tom worked hard. Six days. His eyes were bloody from staring at the seam of his labor. Heavy-lidded, he would watch the early evening shows and announce, "Well, g'night," and move off to their bedroom.

She had tea in late afternoon. There was more light inside than without, where a yellow tinge foretold the coming of night. And piping voices and stamping in the back entry relieved her frown with the knowledge that the children were home. *No, Grandpa was sleeping now and not to be bothered. Yes, one cookie only and some milk. Do not ruin your supper. No TV after supper. Homework.* The bustle ended suddenly; it was dark, and she went into the living room, where, a child on either side of him, her father held their tiny hands in his. She switched on a lamp in the corner. The children were lost in the television set, distracted only if she walked in front of it.

She returned to the kitchen, swept patches of snow from the linoleum back into the entryway, and sat and wept. Had she really wished that? Well, that afternoon she had seen her father lying as her brother had and mother had, his lips pulled over his mouth, his white baby hair combed carefully over his forehead, his lids closed, powdered. Did they really

use pins for smiles.

A steadier sound outside was the truck struggling in the drive. She began to set the table quickly, checked the stew, and caught the murmur of voices that were not the television in the living room. At the doorway she saw the children squirming beside their grandfather. "Friendly?" he was saying. "Well, sir, I think he is. Yes, he is. As friendly as great creatures like that can be. Last night he sang to me. The first time."

Not in years had he spoken as animatedly to her, or to Tom, to whom he hardly spoke at all. She wondered at the symbiosis of the very aged and the very young, this drawing of a circle, but she knew the truck sound had stopped outside.

"Grandpa," she said. "Tom's home. Kids, your father's here."

The old man fell silent, and the children squirmed but they said nothing.

She asked Tom if the roads were bad, and he said they were but he had beaten the plow on the main highway that morning and the access road had been plowed out by the time he came home that night. The forecast was for more snow through the night. "Has he put a shirt on?" Tom asked, suddenly.

"I think he's getting one now," she said, her father and the children having disappeared to get ready for supper.

"What did Marlene say?" Tom drank the last quarter of a can of beer from the refrigerator.

"Well, not much. Tom, I couldn't get her."

"Why not?"

"She must not be home, I guess."

He gestured toward the window with the beer can. "Not home?"

"Well, I don't know." It was not likely that her sister would or could have left her place in such weather. "It could be the phone."

"What time'd you call her?"

She decided he was playing with her lie, and so she said, "I'll reach her tomorrow, I'm sure."

"Something else," he said. "Kids're talking about it in school. The bird."

"Why, I wouldn't think—"

"Emery asked me 'bout it. Gibed me some. His kids heard about it. Bird comes at night and visits on the windowsill." Tom examined the latest wound on his thumb knuckle. "Bird says things, says Emery to me, and wants to know what he says. Chrissake, Marge; we got enough without that." Tom opened a fresh beer.

She called supper, and they came down, her father wearing a flannel shirt. Tom said a brief, semi-Catholic grace. Before the "amen" he paused and said, " 'nother thing, God. Would you mind please tellin' that bird that comes to bother Grandpa and lets out all the heat at night to stay away? Just stay away. Amen."

When he looked up, the old man's head remained bowed, but turned to the right as if to gaze at the floor beside his place.

They had gotten to dessert, a box pudding, and she was serving coffee when the girl spoke up, "Daddy. Why is it you don't like the bird?"

He frowned. "Well, you know why?" She paused, listening, the coffeepot suspended above the burners. "Because there isn't any bird," he continued, "just isn't any. And, well, you may as well know, too" — he was looking at the old man — "you're are runnin' us out of house and home with that damn window open all night." She poured the coffee, touching her father on the shoulder as she came to his place.

"You kids," Tom went on, "have been talkin' about the bird on the bus and in school, too. You have."

"Teacher asked," said the girl.

"Asked about the bird?" said her father.

"No. She asked about—" She turned to her brother, who said:

"To tell about the most interesting thing—"

"Yeah, that's what it was, the most interesting thing ever happened—"

"An' you decided it was the bird. Well, you lied, then, 'cause there ain't no bird. Now, listen—"

She said, "Tom—"

"Hell, he can hear it, too. Look," he said to his father-in-law, "we don't talk much, you don't say two words to me, but listen, these kids gotta grow up here. What'll people think, finally? Oh, yeah, the people over there with the big bird that comes in the night." He put his index finger near his temple and waggled it around. "It don't matter anymore to you now. But *they* gotta grow up here."

She had moved to the back of her father's chair and had besought him with her eyes not to go on, but Tom had made the speech anyway, and when he finished, he drank furiously from his coffee cup until it was drained and he left for the television set. She warmed her father's coffee, said "homework" to the children, and they went softly to their room. She was not aware of having spoken until her father craned his head and looked up into her face inquiringly.

"What? Oh, why, I said — I said 'dark, hard winter.' " In his eyes was a remembrance flickering in the blue. He smiled and reached up to put his fingers on her hand on his shoulder.

At first it was a remonstrance of her body operating independently of her mind. Her hands grasped the edge of the comforter and pulled them more tightly around her shoulders, and her knees drew her legs up under her in conservation of warmth. But the discomfort of being cold and asleep persisted until she was conscious of it. At first she thought that Tom was up, but she felt him next to her. She raised her head from her pillow, reached out her arm, and moved it in the unseen air above the bed. It had grown unusually cold. Her heart sank. She listened.

Normally, it was Tom who awakened to this. Ofttimes she did not come around at all, as he got up, swearing, to trek the hall, close the window in the old man's room, check the thermostat, and return to bed. Often he would take the comforter, enough of it, at least, from her to ensure her waking up.

A wave of hopelessness engulfed her. She slipped to the edge of the bed, carefully replacing the comforter behind her so as to retain for her husband what heat there remained in the bed. She wrapped her robe about her, found her slippers in the dark, and paused at the hallway. A muffled silence told her it was still snowing. Where there should not have been light there was, a little of it streaming down the hall, from the bathroom. As she stepped out she saw the familiar little forms of her children by their grandfather's door. She closed her bedroom door behind her and moved toward them. They seemed not to notice her as she approached. She held her finger to her lips as she came to them shaking her head, bidding silence. Neither child spoke until she whispered, "What are you doing up? Why are you out here?"

The boy spoke, also in whispers, "We woke up."

"Well, I see that, but—" As she joined them at the doorway of her father's room, she saw that it was open, and a stream of cold air tinged with a fine silt of snow stung her face. She had expected it, the window flung up and confused drafts of blowing snow flying through the open square.

"Grandpa?" she whispered. Her eyes adjusted to the impoverished light in the room and revealed to her the bed by the window with no one there. She reached for the light switch by the door. The room light confirmed that the bed was empty, the covers thrown back. A window of snow was accumulating on the carpet beneath the window.

"Close that," she said to the boy as they entered the room. "Is he in the bathroom?"

The girl said, "No, we were just there to turn on the light."

"Why are you up?"

"We got cold," the girl said, "and he," — indicating the boy — "said there was a sound, like wind."

"The wind through the window?"

"Bigger," said the boy.

"Well, find Grandpa," she said, when the window had been closed, and they hurried off. He was probably in the kitchen, she reasoned, not having eaten much after the fuss at the table with Tom over the bird.... The thought coincided precisely with her raising her head from scooping up the snow beneath the window. Half on the pillow, half on the sheet lay a long dark shadow that did not disappear when her own shadow moved across it. She bent to touch it, hesitated, and picked it up. It was as long as those peacock plumes sold at the fair in Fargo. But it was broader, stiffer, and

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Installment 1: *In Which We Begin Our Journey*

It was well-met for Charles Foster Kane, and no less salutary for me; and so I begin this initial installment of these monthly ruminations-on-movies with a *Declaration of Principles.*

I will, first and always, try to entertain. I will judge film both as Art and as Craft. I will never praise a bad film simply because it has spectacular special effects. I will never allow my own film work to impede the honest discussion, favorable or otherwise, of films made by my friends or employers, current or potential. I will not excuse dishonest filmmaking just because it is good sf; I will not excuse good filmmaking if it is bad sf. I will not review sf films as if they were exempt from the highest standards of any artform ... to do so would be to apologize for them as if I believed — as many condescending critics do — that they are lame, or trash, and so do not have to measure up to the rigors of High Art. I will use big words from time to time, the meanings of which I may only vaguely perceive, in hopes such cupidity will send you scampering to your dictionary: I will call such behavior "public service."

GREYSTOKE: THE LEGEND OF TARZAN, LORD OF THE APES (Warner Bros.) is, conceptually, not only a disaster, but one of the most shameful examples of directorial *auteurism* since Bertrand Tavernier gratuitously changed Jim Thompson's Pop. 1280 to Pop. 1278 in *Coup De Torchon* for no better reason than to put his own stamp of squatterdom on a dead novelist's work. It is a film that sells itself as the first authentic rendition of Bur-

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roughs's classic high-trash adventure novel of 1914, and is, in truth, as skewed a vision as the horrendous Bo-John Derek version.

What we have been given — and there is a story behind the story that could serve as the classic paradigm for the way the film industry treats its writers — is more *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* than the Lord of the Apes. It is *Chimps of Fire* by Hugh Hudson, director of that movie about running on the beach to Vangelis music. It is not the *Greystoke* on which scenarist Robert Towne lavished years and miles of visceral material to shepherd toward production, only to have it taken from his control and given over to another with a Visigoth's respect for the primacy of interest of the creator.

It is Jekyll and Hyde. It is a schizophrenic film. It is half fowl and half foul.

That it has drawn enthusiastic comment from such film critics as Jay Cocks in *Newsweek* and Vincent Canby (who fair wets himself with naive enthusiasm) in the *New York Times* is more saddening than anomalous. They seem to have swallowed whole the hype that this is the variorum Tarzan text. It is not. When Robert Towne (of whom more in a moment) began transferring his admiration and affection for the book to screenplay form, he understood with a fine writer's clarity of vision that the reason Tarzan has become one of the few universal literary icons is that old Edgar Rice knew precisely what he was doing. Canby seems startled to find resonances of the "wild child" fable as previously best-interpreted in the François Truffaut film of 1970. Of course! It's there; in the book; Burroughs drew on the familiar trope to provide a subtextual archetype. He was — in the best sense of the word — a consummate hack. (It is not by chance that there are only five literary creations known throughout the world. Children in Zaire who have never heard of Hamlet or Jay Gatsby or Emma Bovary or Raskolnikov know these five: Tarzan, Superman, Mickey Mouse, Robin Hood and Sherlock Holmes. They know them because they are free-floating universal images.)

And were parvenus like Canby and Cocks not above familiarizing themselves with the original novel, they would not be trumpeting this hermaphroditic poseur as True Writ.

True Writ was the original screenplay by Robert Towne. He tried for twelve years to get *Greystoke* produced. Chances were good. Towne is one of the very few scenarists in Hollywood whose storytelling sense is the equal of a good novelist's. And the *only* parts of *Greystoke* that are worth the candle are those that Hudson shot scene-for-scene from the screenplay. How does one know that? Because *Greystoke* was a legend in Hollywood for more than a decade. Copies of the script were available. Many of us read it and marveled. We waited expectant-

ly, hoping someone would have the sense to give Towne the seed money to begin preparations. More about *that* in a moment.

You may not know this story about Robert Towne: the screenplay for *Chinatown* (1974) was based on the historical case of the theft of the Owens Valley water and development of California's San Fernando Valley by machinations so scuzzy that they paralleled for infamous wheeling/dealing the Teapot Dome Scandal. The great Southern California robber barons — after whom streets and highways have been named — Mulholland, May, Doheny, to name a few — fleeced hundreds of thousands of people to effect their scheme. It is rumored that one of the men ruined in this skullduggery was Robert Towne's grandfather. So he wrote *Chinatown* to get even, to make some small gesture toward justice in the name of his family. The film was, of course, taken over by director Roman Polanski, who — like Hugh Hudson — had his own "vision" of what the film should be. And what went up on the screen bore only minimal resemblance to that which Towne had broken his butt to create.

Ten years later: Towne is a gentleman, and continues to resist the temptation to vilify Polanski. He will not speak of the perfidy, but the grinding of his teeth, even today, is like the settling of tectonic plates.

More sinned against than sinning, Towne has had to swallow the bitter vetch of another labor of love being wrenched from his sure hands and given over to an improbable replacement.

The problem for the studios, when they considered his script, was the actualizing of the chimp suits for the jungle sequences. Remember that only in the last ten years have we seen such a quantum leap in technical expertise where such special effects are concerned. The key phrase during those hustling years for Towne was, "The chimps have to age as the child grows up; that means they have to be better costumes than the apes in *2001*." For a long time such a thing was impossible. Finally, Warner Bros. gave Towne five hundred thousand dollars and told him they'd make the film if he could find some SFX guy who could solve the problem.

Towne went to all the best people and eventually everyone said, "The only hope you've got is Rick Baker." Remember: this was before Baker's rise to prominence. Towne gave the script to Baker, who read it and came back to say yes, he could lick the problem, but it would take two years. Towne asked him, if he had unlimited financing, how long would it take? Baker said, "Two years."

So the studio — with the predictable parvenu thinking of bottom-line boobs — went to that season's hot ticket, Carlo Rimbaldi, who had just hit it big with his creation of the alien in *E.T. — The Extraterrestrial*. He read

the script and said, "I can do it in eight months; four hundred thousand dollars."

Towne had reservations. He liked what Baker had said; he felt Baker was the answer. But the studio overrode his qualms. They gave Rimbaldi the assignment. More than a year and six hundred thousand dollars later: not one suit. And that was the exit for Towne, because the jamook at the studio could not admit it had been *his* miscalculation.

The film was Warner's property at that point, and they decided to repeat their sophomoric mistakes by handing the Towne project to *that* season's hot ticket, Hugh Hudson, whose *Chariots of Fire,* while not actually making much money, had won the Oscar. He was the fairhaired item, and so it didn't matter that they were turning over what is, essentially, for all its English trappings, an American boys' pulp adventure story to a director known for one film of the Old School Tie, King & Country idiom.

And Hudson, surfeited with hubris, has taken the Towne screenplay, a thing of unity and brilliance, and given it to his writer buddy Michael Austin. And they have looked down their snouts at old ERB's magnum opus, and they have said, "Well, yes, there is rawther a crude vigah to this stuff, but mostly it's muck. Let's have done with the messy parts as quickly as we can, and get back to Old Blighty."

If you recall *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,* the good doctor Henry Jekyll is something of a bore. A bit more than a bit of a goody-two-shoes, stiff upper-lipped and a model of rectitude. England's answer to the late George Apley. It is not until the appearance of the bestial Hyde that the story comes to life, that the film leaps off the screen, that the excitement begins to crackle. It is our inherent fascination with the Beast. And Stevenson (like Burroughs) knew that about us. So the best parts of ERB and RLS and *Little Caesar* and *Public Enemy* and all the rest are the parts in which the Beast is running loose. Yes, of course, morality almost always insists they get theirs (most notably in the hypocritical ethical code of motion picture and television guidelines which, though loosened these last few years, is still intended to disarm Falwell and his ilk). But what we enjoy most is not the Jekyll goody-goodness, but the Beast.

And that is what is sensational in *Greystoke*: One-third of the film takes place in the jungle as Tarzan is raised by Kala and the chimps. Two-thirds, however, is the Edwardian humdrummery of Henry Jekyll's world: a larger section of scenes we've seen again and again: in *Four Feathers* and *Beau Geste* and every L.P. Hartley yawner in which the tatters of the Empire try to convince the rest of the world that the sun never sets on *dieu et mon droit.*

The story of how Hugh Hudson ruined Rick Baker's Kala costume (oh, did I neglect to mention that the most

stunning aspect of that Towne-inspired valid section is the special chimp suits built — in two years — by, er, uh, Rick Baker?) by scheduling as the first scene to be shot the segment in which Tarzan's adoptive mother is riddled by pygmy's arrows — so that Baker had to keep patching it for all the chronologically earlier shootings that came after — is now legend in the industry. (It has been reported that Baker, who had been forbidden by Hudson even to see dailies of the film for which he was in large part responsible, had to be restrained by studio guards from going for Milord Hudson's throat. Up the Colonies!) But Hudson got in all the dull, vapid manor-house clichés his "vision" demanded. And the studio execs, no doubt snowed by Hudson's British accent, nodded and said, swell.

There is very little of the Burroughs novel left. Towne wrote a savage screenplay, in which Tarzan (a name never spoken in the film for some moronic reason) was a savage, sometimes noble, sometimes not. Then Hugh Hudson and his buddy Michael Austin savaged it by removing the savagery. If you are looking for a Tarzan who, as in the novel, is an active entity, you will be disappointed. They have made him constantly and consistently *re*active. He is led this way and that way, even by weak English stereotypes. And in the one scene back in England when Jane's suitor James Fox seems about to use a riding crop or somesuch on a mentally-retarded servant, and Lord John Clayton leaps from the parapet to stop him, and we think we will now see the dichotomous savage in reaction to civilization, all he does is pull the riding crop from Fox's hand and look petulant.

Christopher Lambert as the adult Tarzan is splendid. He looks like, and has the same animal charisma, as Belmondo; and no better choice could have been made for the part. Nor could any better choice have been made for the sixth Earl of Greystoke, Tarzan's grandfather, than the late Sir Ralph Richardson, whose warmth and puckishness are memorable.

The only better choice that could have been made, to save this tragic split-personality film, was to have left it in the hands of its creator ... and not have given it over to a pompous furriner more attuned to Trollope than Tarzan.

And if, perchance, some passing naïf senses in you a deep well of humanism, and inquires if you can encapsulate the essense of tragedy, you might suggest that s/he note the screenplay credits on *Greystoke*. The scenarists listed are P.H. Vazak and Michael Austin. "P.H. Vazak" is the registered pseudonym used by a fine artist named Robert Towne. And you might quote to your wide-eyed questioner the words of the poet Antonin Artaud, who said: "Very little is needed to destroy a man. He needs only the conviction that his work is useless."

Suzette Haden Elgin is the author of seven SF novels and an occasional short story such as this distinctive tale about a discovery that rids the Arkansas Ozarks of ticks, only to find them infested with Something Else.

Magic Granny Says Don't Meddle

BY
SUZETTE HADEN ELGIN

If there hadn't been a city woman there that morning, it never would have happened. There wasn't a one of Mary Bethesda's friends that would have so much as blinked when they saw the tick, much less screeched and spilled their Tomato Tonic all over Mary B's good tablecloth. It was a *big* tick, grant the poor woman that, and it stood out on the white linen like the nastiness it was — a deep chocolate brown with an ivory mark on its ugly back and eight busy legs carrying it right along down the middle of the table ... not a pretty sight. But if the women of Meander, Arkansas, had squawked and leaped every time they saw a tick, they'd have had little time to do much else. You might go so far as to say, "Oh, hellfire, there goes another tick," but that was the full extent of it.

Mary Bethesda moved swiftly, as was indicated, while Laura Dellahew soothed the visiting flatlander she'd brought with her. You don't just squash a tick, you either burn it or you flush it, and Mary B often wondered what variety of gigantic mutant ticks might swarm in the septic tanks and sewer systems, but she was careful not to mention this to Laura's friend. She picked up the pitcher of Tomato Tonic and set it out of harm's way, made sure that everybody else had a good grip on their glasses, made a tiny cup in the linen to hold the tick secure, and whisked the whole mess out to the back porch, taking a wooden match from the box on the stove as she went by it.

"Just you go right ahead and enjoy yourselves," she called back over her shoulder, and she was pretty sure they'd do that. Mary Bethesda made a mighty fine and potent Tomato Tonic,

if she did say so herself. The city woman had put a foot in it, looking at the frosty pitcher and declaring that she loved Bloody Marys, but Laura had been right there to cover for her. "Oh, my, Lucille," she'd said, "it's nothing of the kind; it's Mary Bethesda's own special Tomato Tonic!"

Bloody Mary, indeed. Talk about tacky. Mary B served Tomato Tonic, which a person could name out loud without feeling like a tart, and a sacreligious tart at that. Vodka, American-made; and her own homemade tomato juice. Lots of steak sauce; and salt, and lemon pepper. Made your hair curly. Mary B's only regret was that she'd turned fifty before she discovered the recipe. Living in a dry county like she did, she'd gotten behind.

She sat down on the bench by the back door, ready to strike the match and put finished to that tick, and considerably put out at the trouble she was going to have getting the stain out of that tablecloth. And then she noticed something odd. That linen was so heavy you couldn't have strained juice through it, and she'd expected the tick to be floating around in its little puddle. But it wasn't. It was as still as could be, and the puddle gone entirely dry. Mary B looked in her palm, where the Tonic should have soaked through to if it had soaked anywhere, but there wasn't a bit of it on the wrong side of the linen. And while she was sitting there staring and wondering, the tick rolled over on its back with all eight legs straight up in the air, gave one convulsive wiggle, and just lay there.

"Well," said Mary B. "Dead or drunk, one or the other. What on earth?"

This was no time for her to consider first aid for ticks, she left it at that for the moment. The tick she put in a peanut butter jar with holes punched in the lid, kept for catching ladybugs in, and set it on the windowsill to look at later on when her company was all gone home. And then she walked back into the house to join the rest of the ladies, muttering a swift prayer along the lines of this being enough for one morning and hold the tornadoes, thank you, Lord.

By the time she got back to the tick it was past noon, and the thermometer on the porch rail stood at 94 degrees. She picked up the peanut butter jar and took a good look; the tick just lay there. And when she shook the jar, it rattled around inside without so much as a twitch. She took the top off the jar and poked the thing with the end of the wooden match — nothing happened.

"Now that," said Mary B, "is one dead bug, to my way of thinking." To be certain sure, she struck the match and held it right to the tick's broad back, but there was really no question about it in her mind. The question that was in her mind was quite a different one, and she intended to see it answered promptly. She knew for a fact that there was a good half cup of her Tomato Tonic left in the bottom of

that pitcher, and it ought to be enough for what she needed.

Mary Bethesda slipped off her shoes, put her boots on, and headed straight off down the path to the creek. She didn't have to go far; by the time she reached the first patch of shade, she could look down and take her choice of the eight-legged livestock. They were crawling up her boots, a small herd of them to each foot, and she had no need to worry about any of them abandoning her before she could get back to the porch. In five minutes flat she was sitting on the bench again, carefully removing the little varmints from her person and depositing them one by one in the jar with their dead relative. If she was lucky, she'd got them all; if not, she'd soon know from the bites where the strays had gotten to.

"Now," she said. "Now let's us just see what we shall see!"

She got a jar lid and put a few tablespoons of T.T. in it, and set one tick at a time down beside the rosy pool. And every single one of them did the very same thing the first had done. Drank up all it could hold, sat there a minute, rolled over on its back, gave one shudder, and died dead.

"Well, I'll be dee-double-blasted and deep fried," breathed Mary B, when she was satisified there was no mistake, "if I haven't discovered a Cure For Ticks!" She felt like that fellow that'd forgotten to be careful about mold and come up with penicillin.

Word got around, naturally; Mary Bethesda was not a selfish woman. The county agent, just tickled to death, worked it out scientifically for everybody, and it turned out that ticks weren't particular. Generic tomato juice was fine with them, and plain old grain alcohol would do, just so long as you laid on the steak sauce and the salt and the lemon pepper with a generous hand. And just a dash of dill didn't hurt matters.

"It's the juice and spices that draws 'em," said the agent, "and it's the alcohol that kills 'em. Miss Mary B, you've done the Ozarks a good turn — I don't rightly know how to make it clear to you how important this is...." On and on. Natter, natter. Mary B knew quite well how important it was, having lived in Arkansas her whole life long, and she had things to do. She patted his hand and went off and left him still nattering.

All over Meander, and then all over the county, people mixed up the modified Tomato Tonic, filled their sprayers, and spread the good word. It being well known that the one and only function a tick fills in this world is the production of more ticks, they went at it with a will and no reservations. And once the governor'd had time to check it out and be certain it really did work, he got in on it, too,

calling out the National Guard to spray T.T. on the more sizable stretches of woods and the various public parks. Mary B got asked to go on all the morning news shows for human interest, and turned them down so hard it rattled the phone; the governor was less retiring, and they saw a good deal of him before the novelty wore off. Him and the experts, there on the screen; with the experts saying the whole thing was ridiculous, and the governor just smiling easy and reminding them that it *worked*.

Which it most surely did. The ticks died by the millions, and the National Guard ran out of places and creatures to spray. And one morning along about 6:30 on the 14th of August, coming up hot and no sign of rain, all over the Ozarks the people suddenly blinked, looked hard around them, and said, "Oh, my LORD!" all together. For lo and behold, the Arkansas Ozarks (now free of ticks) were infested again. Only this time, it was angels.

Angels! They were beautiful and they were terrifying and they stood twelve magnificent feet tall. Their snow-white wings were folded, and all about their faces played touches of golden light. Walking under the trees in grave discussion, sitting in dignified clusters along the creekbanks, they were all the glorious colors of heaven. Stained-glass scarlet and emerald and royal blue and silver and gold and purple, blazing with all the colors of the great cathedrals of Europe. And, thought, Mary B, totally unsuitable for the modest farmhouses and ramshackle barns round which they gathered.

The angels themselves were no trouble at all. So far as anybody could tell, they were unaware of the other inhabitants of the earth. You could walk right through one and feel nothing but a strange prickling at the back of your neck. It was easy to understand how they could have been here all this time, without anyone ever suspecting — they passed right through walls, right through trees, right through people, with never a flicker or a bump or a misadventure.

Some carried little fuddy-duddy-looking harps, and some had what are called lyres, and some had skinny trumpets; and you could watch them making heavenly music, if you cared to. You couldn't hear them, however, nor smell them nor touch them, nor — presumably — taste them, should angel tasting be your curious perversion; they were available only to the wondering eye. And if it had been only the angels, it's likely that people would have gotten used to them in time. As if they'd been no more than another part of the Ozark landscape, which had always been a cause for wonderment. If they were a tad inhibiting on occasion ("LEroy! Not in front of the ANgels!"), that was probably all to the good.

But unfortunately, it did not end there. For in just the same fashion that

rotting meat draws flies, in just the same fashion that warm flesh used to draw ticks, the angels turned out to be a terrific draw, and what they drew was tourists.

The Ozark had always had tourists in abundance, with people that had no better sense calling them an "industry," but not like this. Not tourists in the tens of thousands, and the hundreds of thousands, packed body to sweating body with scarcely room to get their money out of their pockets. Never before had there been anything even remotely like this.

They came from all over the world. Pilgrims and skeptics and theologians, businessmen and media crews and youth groups, the very old and the very young, the sick and the well, the undifferentiated gawkers — they came to see the angels. To walk through them, that especially, shivering with the delicious lese majesty of it all. To take pictures of them, in spite of the fact no matter how fancy your equipment or how expensive your film, the result was always black and white and grainy. There'd be the old red barn and the big green cedars and the bright blue sky piled high with its useless white clouds; and in among all that color, there'd be the sorry grainy black and white image of the angels. All that mortal cameras were up to, apparently. It was just enough, going out on the television to all the world, to whet that world's appetites, and make the entire population determined to trek off to the Ozarks and see the spectacle in glorious Technicolor, on the spot.

It was purely awful. There was no peace in the Arkansas Ozarks, no quiet, no privacy, and no sanity. Life ground to a halt and kept right on grinding. Mary Bethesda was so sorry that she *ached*. Not that anybody held it against her, for who'd have thought it? Whoever, for one blessed minute, would have *thought* it? But she was truly sorry, all the same.

The theologians, after due and solemn debate, found a name for it. The Divine Constraint, they called it. According to them, the Almighty had seen fit to set ticks in the Arkansas Ozarks because — so long as the ticks were there, lurking at the tops of the grasses — they served to shield the eyes of the people against the terrible glory of the angels. That, the theologians felt, however curious the Almighty's choice of constraining mechanisms, was not in question. What *was* in question, and a matter of endless harangues and solemn conferences, was this: Had the Ozarkers sinned in ridding the Ozarks of the Divine Constraint, or had they simply demonstrated the superior state of their souls in having found the means to set it aside? Nobody knew the answer, unless the angels did — and if they knew, they weren't telling. And Mary Bethesda, after the first horrible time she heard herself right out in public being

called "The Instrument of Removal of the Divine Constraint, Mary Bethesda Wallwether," gave up church altogether. Going to church didn't represent anything you could call worship these days, anyway, what with the church buildings packed to the rafters with total strangers, and the angels strolling in and out and not so much as pausing even during the prayers. Mary B, she sat home and did her worshiping there, with her eyes tight shut the entire time so as not to see the heavenly beings that shared her living space. The ignorant, pounding on her front door and demanding that she come out and have her picture taken, she ignored. And she found herself seriously thinking that she might pick up and move away — never mind her age and her whole life spent right here in this one house.

"Move to where, Mary B, California?" Laura Dellahew asked her when she mentioned it.

"Job's beard, Laura," said Mary B, "I mean to get *away* from crowds of lunatics, not go looking for them!"

"Shoot, there's no lunatics left in California, Mary B. They are all right out there!" And Laura waved her arm wide toward the world outside Mary B's double-bolted front door and drawn window shades. "*And* most of the population of Japan. *And*—"

"Oh, hush!" Mary B snapped at her. "Don't you think I know? Don't tell me about it!"

"Well, where to, then? You've always lived here, Mary B. Where would you go?"

"Maine, I expect."

"Maine!"

"No ticks. And most of the year, no tourists."

And she might just do it, too, thought Mary B. Because life in the Ozarks had become a horror.

It got to be October, and the heat faded, but the angels didn't. Beside them, the splendor of the autumn leaves was drab and tawdry and boring. And still the hordes came and stood and stared and disputed and jostled. And stayed.

There came a day when Mary B found herself desperate for peace. Mad with lust for quiet. So desperate and so madly lustful that she went somewhere she ordinarily could not have been made to go short of a shotgun at her head. Down by the creek, where the limestone bluff hung over the water, there was a cave cut back deep into the heart of the bluff. You had to wade the creek to get to it, and then you had to crawl through cold clay and rodent dung and a festoon of bats to get inside it, and it was no fit place for a respectable person even at the best of times.

But it was worth it, briefly. Once past the worst of it and well under the bluff, Mary B had the first real privacy she'd known in months. She'd been prepared to find the angels there, too, and to be grateful she had only the heavenly company to contend with,

but there wasn't a single one. And not a single theologian.

Mary Bethesda just sat down on the cold, dank floor and *thrived* on the wonder of aloneness. Just her, she thought, and the bats, and you didn't really count bats.

And then, all too quickly, she got that feeling that means you're not alone after all, and she sighed and let the wonder go, reluctantly, and turned her head to see what it was that was sharing this foul place with her.

"Why!" she said then, and her voice echoed at her a little. "You poor old thing! Whatever are you doing in here?"

The old dog looked at her like that was a fool question, which it surely was. No doubt it had grown as sick of humanity as the Ozarkers had.

"You all right, girl?" Mary B hazarded, wary of rabies the bats carried. She reached out one hand, gingerly, to touch the dog's neck, and then she clucked her tongue and shook her head. "Poor old thing," said Mary Bethesda. "You are just covered all over with ticks."

Covered all over with ticks?

It didn't take an echo to bring that home to Mary B, once she'd said it. She kept one hand tight on the hound bitch's neck, to be certain it couldn't get loose from her, and then she got on her knees and tendered her most heartfelt thanks right then and there.

"And it stands to reason," she told the Almighty, as if it might be news, "it stands to reason! We ought to of *known* that there had to be some ticks still left around here, that were keeping that Constraint perking just the smallest bit! Because otherwise, we'd of been able to hear the damn angels, and touch them, and—

At that point she heard herself, and was deeply shocked, and she had to stop and insert a sincere apology for referring to the angels that way. But she felt sure that the Almighty would make allowances, both for what she'd been through these past few months and for her current state of joyful agitation.

"Come on, girl," she said to the dog gently, once she'd settled her affairs with the Lord. "You come home with me." She slipped off the sash to her dress, thankful she'd worn something with a waist to it, and knotted it around the animal's neck. And when they got to the creek, Mary B hefted the dog right up in her arms and carried it over like a baby, for all that it must have weighed sixty pounds; she was not about to take a chance on losing even one of her little insect friends to the icy water. It bewildered the dog considerably, but Mary B kept a firm grip on her. She stopped at the edge of her woods to make sure there were no tourists and no camera crews in her backyard; and then she and the dog dashed for the house, through the screen door, and right into Mary B's kitchen.

Ticks and all, Mary B gave the dog a big bowl of scraps and another one of clean water, putting out of her mind what her mother would have said about having that filthy animal in the house. Desperate situations required desperate measures. She waited until she was sure the dog was comfortable, and then she gripped its muzzle in her hand and talked to it seriously, apologizing for what she was about to do.

Either the dog understood her, or it was past caring what she did; for it lay without a protest while Mary Bethesda put a scrupulously careful red-hot needle to the back of every last tick on its dirty hide, making each one back out sudden and hale and hearty from where it clung and drop off onto her kitchen floor. Where she was waiting to grab it and drop it into her trusty peanut butter jar, saying "Praise the Lord!" every time and meaning it all the way to her toes.

It was suppertime when she was finally through with her task. She'd scrubbed the dog in a washtub of strong laundry soap till it was fit to be near, and put it to lie on an old quilt out on the porch. She'd scrubbed her own self and washed her hair and made her person clean again. She'd scoured her kitchen floor, where the tick collection had gone on, until she felt safe making a sandwich right flat on it. And safe on her kitchen table, just waiting for her to carry it out into what had been Paradise and was now a good deal more like the Gates of Hell, out among the waiting tall grasses and the waiting tall tourists, was the jar teeming with its carnival of ticks. Big ones and little ones, brown ones and pale gray ones, spotted ones and plain ones.... That dog had been a veritable *mess* of ticks.

This time Mary Bethesda didn't feel like that man that'd discovered penicillin. No, she felt like a different man. What's his name, that had gone all over planting apple trees. And she chuckled, remembering, and said, "That's me! Mary Bethesda Tickseed!" as she picked up the glass jar and headed out to set matters to rights.

On her back steps, nine glorious, splendid angels sat tightly huddled and engaged in one of their silent, mysterious activities, mouths moving and not a sound coming out. Another time she might have gone around them, just to show her respect, and she stopped for just a minute and considered it. But it was, after all, *her* back steps, and she had a lot of work ahead of her that night.

"Excuse me," said Mary Bethesda courteously. And she just walked right through them out into the long waiting shadows of the evening.



Here is something different: a story about "psychic photography" by a writer new to F&SF. Mr. Dalmas lives in California, has degrees in forestry and plant ecology and has published work on forestry. He is also the author of several SF novels, including THE YNGLING and THE VARKAUS CONSPIRACY (Tor Books).

The Picture Man

BY

JOHN DALMAS

I put down my copy of *Ecological Review* and walked over to the TV. I generally liked to catch the ten o'clock news. The picture popped out to fill the screen; the last moment of the opening commercials was just flashing off.

I sat back down to watch, all by myself in my three-bedroom, one-and-a-half-bath, near-campus, 1950-model house. It got a little lonely at times since Eydie had "dear John'ed" me with Barney Foster, but it was certainly quieter and less irritating. For example, the house wasn't dominated night after night by game shows, situation "comedies," and TV dramas.

I'd learned the hard way that marrying the best-looking girl in the class and living happily ever after weren't necessarily the same thing.

Several female faculty and staff members had demonstrated an interest in filling the presumptive hole in my life, and there had been some interesting evenings. Maggie Lanning in particular combined looks and physical interest with remarkable level-headedness in every area we'd talked about. Plus, she was willing to hike in the rain, played a great forward in couples basketball (she was an assistant professor in phys. ed.), and even had a collection of old John Campbell editorials cut from years of *Astoundings* and *Analogs*.

Not that she was old. She was thirty-three — two years younger than I.

But marriage? We could already talk and romp at our mutual convenience, and she had one major drawback: ten-year-old Lanny. Lanny was a good kid, we got along fine, and he kept dropping hints that I'd make a good dad and Maggie would make a

good wife. But he was going to be a *teenager* in less than three years.

And I was still enjoying my new independence. I should, I decided, write a thank-you note to Barney, now that the divorce was final. I wouldn't, though. It would be a cheap shot, and I wouldn't feel good about it afterward.

The weatherman joggled me out of my reverie with mention of a sunspot storm. So when the basketball and hockey scores were over, I put on a jacket and went to the door. Sunspots might mean an aurora display, and watching northern lights was one of my favorite spectator activities.

If I'd turned on the porch light before I went out, I might not have seen what I did. A stocky, square-looking man was digging in my plastic trash can that sat by the curb waiting for morning pickup. Two steps, and he could have been out of sight behind Chuck Ciccone's privet hedge. He'd dug in to the armpit, setting some contents on the sidewalk for better access, straightened for a moment, then tidily put everything back in the can and replaced the lid, clamping it down. There hadn't been anything edible or valuable in the can.

"Hey!" I said. Slowly he looked toward me, then lowered his face and started to walk off.

"Just a minute!" I called. "Come on in. Do me a favor; help me eat some leftovers."

The dim face looked at me again for a few seconds, then he walked toward the house, hands stuffed in the pocket of his denim work jacket. For a moment I had a feeling of strangeness as, hunched against the cold and night, he approached. Not a feeling of threat. Just strangeness.

The square, high-cheekboned face, grimy and stubbled, was lined with the track record of late middle age. He looked like someone who'd ridden into town on a freight train, probably headed south. I held the door for him — it was that or wash the knob — and headed him for the bathroom.

"Why don't you shower down while I cook?" I said, then pointed out the guest towel and washcloth and left him there.

Being fresh out of leftovers, I put eggs and wienies on to boil, set a can of beans over a low flame, and put the teakettle on for hot chocolate. When everything was under way, I resurrected an old pair of jeans and a baggy sweatshirt and put them on the bathroom rug. The place was full of steam, like a turkish bath; he must have a remarkable tolerance for hot water, I thought. I announced to the shower that I was going to run his clothes through the washer and dryer, that I was leaving some of mine he could wear, and, getting a faint acknowledgment, went and started the washing cycle. I even threw his black stocking cap in; I'd have to remember not to put it in the dryer.

What in the hell, I asked myself, *are you doing? This guy could be a*

psycho. He could murder and rob you. But there'd been nothing deadlier than a small jackknife in his pockets.

On an impulse, and feeling uncomfortable about it, I checked his wallet. It had no money. A merchant mariner's certificate identified him as Jaakko Savimaki, of Calumet, Michigan. Fireman, oiler, water tender. Dated 1951 — thirty two years back. The square face in the picture was a youthful version of my man's, the hair blonde and crewcut. His driver's license address was Ironwood, Michigan; I'd heard about the mines up there being shut down.

Opening the bathroom door, I peered into the clouded interior. "You'll find a razor and shaving cream in the medicine cabinet," I said, and turned on the exhaust fan so he could find the mirror.

When he came out, he looked a lot better, although on him, my jeans were a couple of inches too long and a couple too tight. He'd made do by folding cuffs into them, leaving the waistband open, and keeping them up with the elastic belt.

"My name's Terry," I said, "Terry O'Brien."

"Mine is Jake," he answered, "Jake Hill."

Even in those few words, I detected an accent.

"Mr. Hill, I took the liberty of looking in your billfold for identification. It said your name is Savimaki."

He didn't blush or look angry or embarrassed. The strange, soft blue eyes just gazed at me as if examining the inside of my head.

"Savimaki is a kind of hill in Finnish," he said. "Away from home, it's easier to just tell people 'Hill.' "

I nodded. "Got it," I said. "All right, Mr. Savimaki, supper is on the counter."

As hungry as he must have been, he didn't bolt his food. When he'd finished, he thanked me and took his dishes to the sink before I realized what he was doing. Then he turned to me, and again his eyes were direct. I got the feeling that he saw more than other people did. "How do I pay you back?" he asked.

"Forget it. It's on me."

He didn't shake his head — simply said, "It's not all right for me to take something for nothing."

Well, I thought, *that's a refreshing viewpoint.* I wasn't sure I totally agreed with it, in a country where the system was so screwed up that some people found themselves backed up against the wall. But if everyone had his attitude, things would be a lot better.

"O.K.," I said, "what do you do?"

The pale eyes shifted to the fireplace. "You got any wood to split?"

"No. Sorry. I buy it already split."

"Any carpentry you need done? Windows fixed? Locks repaired?"

I looked at the possibilities. "You hit me at a bad time. I've got nothing like that. Why don't we defer pay-

ment? There'll be snow to shovel a little later in the fall."

His eyes withdrew for a moment; he didn't plan to be around Douglas long. "Tell you what," I suggested, "why don't you pass it on? Help someone else out when you have a chance."

He nodded slowly. "O.K.," he said. "I guess that's O.K." Then he turned to the sink and began to run water for the dishes while I transferred his clothes to the dryer, remembering to hold out his stocking cap. He seemed to think slowly, but he washed dishes fast. They were clean, rinsed, and in the drainer in about two minutes.

When he was done, he followed me into the living room and stood uncomfortably. I could see he still wasn't happy about not exchanging anything for the bath, meal, and laundry. Then he noticed the pictures on my wall, mostly wildland photos. When Eydie had taken her prints from the house, I'd mounted some scenic photographs on mat and hung them to handle the bareness. He walked over and looked at them.

"You got a camera?" he asked.

"Three of them. A 35-mm Pentax for slides, an old Rollei 4 X 5, and a Polaroid 680."

"A Polaroid." He considered that for a moment. "How would you like if I gave you some interesting pictures?"

"What do you mean?"

"Let me show you. Get the Polaroid."

Feeling mystified, I got it reluctantly. When I came back to the living room, he was sitting in a chair.

"Is it loaded?" he asked.

"Always," I said.

"Then aim it at my face." He closed his eyes tightly, his brow clenched with concentration. "When I say 'now,' shoot it."

Feeling foolish, I raised the camera.

"Now," he said. I touched the shutter release, lowered the camera, and waited. He was on his feet beside me when I removed the print. It wasn't a picture of Savimaki. It was a house, somewhat blurred, an old, frame, two-story house with a steep roof, no front porch, and an upstairs door that opened out onto thin air. A ladder was built on the wall up to the strangely placed door.

"Let's do another one," he said. "That one ain't very good. I can get something more interesting than that."

"Wait a minute," I said. "How come it isn't a picture of you?"

Actually, I thought I knew why. Years before, I'd read a book about the detailed, if somewhat ambiguous, studies done on Nick Kopac, the psychic photographer. This looked like the same kind of thing.

"I don't know," he said. "It's just something I can do."

"Strange-looking house. Where is it?"

"In Calumet, Michigan. It's the house I grew up in. It looks like that because they get so much snow there. Some winters you get in and out

through the upstairs door."

"My god! And didn't you know that's what the picture was going to be of?"

"No. I haven't learned how to know yet." He sat down again. "Usually I get something I never even seen before. But it's always a house or a ship. So far. Actually, I only ever did this about ten or twelve times before. I found out about it last winter, by accident, when a guy tried to take a picture of me and I didn't know it. I was reading a magazine, and all he got was a picture of a lighthouse.

"Are you ready now?" he asked.

I nodded. "Yep."

He closed his eyes, I aimed, he said "now" again, and I shot. Together we looked at the print. This one was sharper, hardly blurred at all, showing a square house that looked stuccoed. It reminded me of pictures I'd seen of French farmhouses, but in the background was a broadly naked landscape with what looked like a high, cliff-faced plateau behind it. As an ecologist with a strong interest in biogeography, I was willing to be it was an Afrikaner farmstead in South Africa, and told him so.

He shrugged. "Could be."

We took a couple more, then called it quits, and I showed him the guest bedroom. But my mind was racing. I didn't have a class the next day until two in the afternoon, and I could always cancel my morning office hours, although I didn't like to. I thought I knew where I could get Jake a job. After he sacked down, I went to the phone and called Herb Boeltz.

I didn't actually know Boeltz very well, although as well as I wanted to. We were both in the faculty jogging club. He was a faculty politician, if you know what I mean, reputedly handy with a knife to the back, a full professor in psychology at thirty-two, and a man who always seemed to have access to grant money.

And he was said to be interested in parapsychology.

It was 11:15, and apparently I had wakened him; he didn't sound terribly friendly. So as soon as I'd identified myself, I put it to him this way.

"I think I've got something that can get you a lot of good publicity. Remember the studies on psychic photography at the University of Nebraska? ... That's right, Nick Kopac.

"Well, I've got a guy staying here at my house that does the same sort of thing. I took four shots with my Polaroid; got two houses, a church, and what looks like a commercial fishing boat....

"No, I just met him today. Seems like a good enough guy. Kind of quiet. He needs a job, and I knew, or at least I heard, that you had some grant money that might be available. It looks like a good opportunity for research with some media appeal, if it's handled right."

When I hung up, we had an ap-

pointment for eleven the next morning.

At 11:07 we walked into the Education Building, which also houses the pysch department. I prefer to be on time, but Herron's Men's Wear doesn't open until ten, and we needed some presentable but inexpensive clothes for Jake — slacks, a shirt, shoes, sweater, jacket.... Actually, on my salary there isn't such a thing as inexpensive clothes. Some just cost less.

The meeting wasn't long. Boeltz admitted to eight hundred dollars in an account for exploratory research, which these days suggests he had something on someone. It wasn't enough to put Jake on the payroll. He agreed to pay him a ten-dollar allowance for "cigarettes and socks," as he put it. Jake was to stay with me, and Boeltz would pay me thirty dollars a week toward his room and board for any week in which Jake's services were used, plus ten dollars for each additional session, which we could split as we saw fit.

I was also to transport Jake to and from local sessions, as the studies would be done at Boeltz's home on the other side of town. Starting that evening at 7:30.

Boeltz had a bad reputation, so I wrote it all down and the three of us signed it, and afterward I got it photocopied. I was surprised that my wanting it in writing didn't annoy Boeltz, but he was genial and cheerful throughout. I told myself he ought to be. He was getting a very promising research project, journal articles, personal publicity, and speaking engagements — all at damned little expense. And none of the expense was his personally.

I, on the other hand, would be an unpaid cook and chauffeur. But it did promise to be damned interesting. We hurried home, I grabbed a quick snack, and left Jake there while I rushed off to handle the Thursday afternoon lab in Plant Science 101. It occurred to me that it wasn't ideal, leaving a stranger alone in my home while I went off to work, but somehow I didn't feel concerned.

I took time to phone Maggie that afternoon; I needed someone to tell all this to, and she was the closest thing I had to a confidante. She said she'd be at my place about 5:30 to meet Jake and fix us supper; she sounded almost too cheerful to be real. Then I phoned home. Jake sounded sober and had started reading Churchill's memoirs. I told him Maggie would be coming by to fix supper and might get there before I did.

She drove up just as I was opening the garage door, and we went in together. To find supper on the table! Jake had hunted through refrigerator and cupboard, and had fixed pork chops, rice, sweet potatoes, and cornbread. He'd walked to the store and bought the cornmeal out of a five I'd loaned him. When I came out of shock, I introduced him to Maggie.

"*Hyvää iltaa,* Mr. Savimäki," she said grinning. I stared at her.

"*Hyvää iltaa,* Mrs. Lanning," he said back. "*Mitä Kuuluu?*"

She laughed. "I just used up all the Finnish I remember. When Terry told me your name, I thought, 'Hey! That sounds like home!' I'm from Duluth."

"So that's where you learned to say *Hyvää Iltaa.*"

"Right. My mom is Finnish-American, but my dad wasn't, so I didn't learn much at home. I learned more from the neighbors." She turned to me. "What a treat this is going to be." She gestured at the table. "If I'd fixed it, we'd be having hot dogs and beans."

I knew better than that. After supper, when Jake insisted on washing the dishes, I decided this arrangement was going to be a lot better than I'd thought. And after I took Jake to Boeltz's, I could hurry back to spend an hour or two alone with Maggie.

But that wasn't the way it worked, because Maggie wanted to go along and stay to watch.

That was fine with Boeltz; he liked to play to an audience. He had his own Polaroid, new that day, and took quite a few exposures. The first couple were "whities" — no picture. Not even of Jake. They looked as if they'd been shot into a floodlamp, which was remarkable enough in itself. The third was a blackie — it was as if it hadn't been exposed at all. But Boeltz and I were prepared for that; according to the literature, Kopac used to get whities and blackies a lot.

Boeltz looked at Jake, then, with this knowing smile, went over to a cabinet and poured a whole glass of bourbon. "Would you like a drink, Jake?" he asked. But how it came across was, *'kay, you cunning boy, I know why you're holding out on me.* It irritated me — I felt insulted for Jake — but whether the whiskey had anything to do with it or not, the next picture was of the Taj Mahal, sharp and clear. Then Jake threw down the whiskey like ginger ale.

The next was of a Hilton hotel somewhere. Without saying anything, Boeltz nudged me and pointed at a part of the picture. On the sign, the name Hilton was spelled wrong!

"Jacob," said Boeltz, "how do you spell the name 'Hilton'?"

Jake's quiet eyes fixed on Boeltz. "H-I-L-T-E-N," he answered.

What in the hell, I thought to myself, *does this mean?*

By the time we left, at 8:30, Boeltz had poured a second glass of whiskey down Jake and had half a dozen pretty fair shots — four of them buildings, one a pyramid buried in tropical jungle, and one of a three-masted schooner in a storm.

Jake didn't even seem a little tight when we walked out, although he wasn't saying much. I decided he must have a thing for booze — in his generation that was apparently why most drifters became drifters, although it

might have been the other way around. And Boeltz was using it as a way to keep Jake around and performing.

That was how it looked.

When we got home, I asked Jake how the evening had been for him. His answer was concise and unambiguous: "I don't like Professor Boeltz," he said. He also said he was tired, and went to get ready for bed. Maggie and I watched television until he retired, then moved together on the sofa.

There were three more sessions scattered over the next ten days, semi-public in that Boeltz invited several other faculty members and Bea Lundeen to them. Bea was the owner/editor of the local paper, the *Douglas Clarion*. As chauffeur, I was welcome to sit in, too. It was interesting as hell, although Boeltz didn't try anything that hadn't been tried fifteen years earlier with Nick Kopac.

Under his direction, Jake found he could do things he hadn't tried before. To start with, all he got were seemingly random shots of buildings and ships, pretty much like Kopac had gotten — almost nothing but buildings and statues. But Jake had a lot better batting average — he got a picture about two times out of three, and most of them pretty clear.

Frankly, I was surprised he did that well, because Boeltz was really unpleasant to work for. He continued to use booze in a very obvious way as a carrot on a stick. But I noticed that Jake never asked for it; he didn't even say yes when Boeltz asked if he wanted some. He just accepted it when Boeltz handed it to him.

He certainly knew what to do with it then, though.

Another thing Boeltz did was to talk to Jake as if he were some kind of retard. "Now Jacob, I'm going to ask you to make us a picture of a cathedral. Can you do that for us? Let's try. Do you know what a cathedral is? Good. Very, very good." And, "Oh, that's *good*, Jacob. You're doing very, very *well* tonight."

Maybe that's why Jake kept accepting the whiskey. Not really, though, because I'd swear I saw a sort of amusement in those pale eyes. Maybe he enjoyed seeing Boeltz unwittingly irritate everyone around him and in general make an ass of himself.

The article Bea wrote for the *Clarion* was all about Jake; Boeltz was mentioned only once.

Then there was a lapse of a few days before the fifth session, which was a big one, a Saturday night affair. We'd been written up far beyond the *Clarion* by then, and interest was spreading. More people had been invited than there was room for at Boeltz's , and it was held in the home of Professor Tony Fournais, chairman of the physics department. Fournais was wealthy, had a big house outside town, was cautiously interested in the

project — and made for good positioning: physics had a lot more status than psychology.

Everyone who'd been invited was there. And relatively on time: no one was more than twenty minutes late, even though the streets were snow-packed and slippery and the temperature was about ten degrees. Professor Alfred Kingsley Kenmore had flown in from Virginia — the Kenmore of "Herz-Kenmore-Laubman Clairvoyance Studies" fame. And Marty Martin, the award-winning science writer from the *Trib*.

Maggie went with us.

It started out like a circus, or at least a drawing room comedy. Fournais announced that his assistant was going to film the whole procedure, and had a 16-mm movie camera at one side of the room, on a high tripod, to shoot down at Jake over people's heads. The film would later be examined in slow motion for any sign of hokey-pokey. Then Martin announced that he was going to match every shot of Boeltz's with his own camera and film, to provide a second, independent print. Finally, when Boeltz was ready to begin, Kenmore, who was a psychiatrist and therefore an M.D., had Jake lie down, and examined his eyes, pulling out the upper and lower lids, peering under them with a little light. I haven't the slightest what he was looking for.

Then we got started. Boeltz was on his good behavior for a change: he didn't put Jake down, and no booze was in evidence, confirming that his previous bullshit was deliberate.

He warmed Jake up by letting him do whatever he came up with. He started with an oblique aerial view of a beautiful landscaped home, with city spread out in the midground against a backdrop of mountains. Not Denver, I decided. Maybe Calgary. The next looked like Hong Kong. The third was a double row of tar-papered shacks with deep snow piled all around and forest close behind. A guy wearing what looked like a leather apron was caught in midstride between two of them. When it was shown to Jake, he identifed it as the Axelson-Peltonnen logging camp in Baraga County, Michigan, about 1948. He'd worked there. The guy in the apron, he said was Ole Hovde, the blacksmith. I could tell that Jake was really pleased with that one, and I got a notion that just maybe he'd gotten it deliberately.

Boeltz didn't take any of the pictures himself. Each of them was taken by a different person standing directly in front of Jake and about six feet away. The camera had been bought new by Fournais. The film packs were taken from their sealed wrappers right there in front of us.

Each shot was passed around before the next was taken. Then it was laid on a table, available for further examination.

Martin was off to one side with his camera, and didn't pass his shots around. But after the third, he ar-

ranged them on the table with Boeltz's, making matched pairs.

Boeltz beamed. "Ladies and gentlemen," he announced, "we have something very interesting here: Mr. Martin's photograph's. Come and see!"

I was already there. In each instance, Martin's picture was of the same scene, but as if seen from an angle of about ninety degrees to the right, higher, and farther away.

Everyone crowded around talking, except Fournais's assistant, who stayed by his camera. A couple of them shook Jake's hand as he came over to look. The way the pictures matched up, it was as if the actual scene, the physical scene of each pair, had occupied the location of Jake's chair, in three dimensions. And it was something that hadn't come up in the work with Nick Kopac.

Boeltz was ready now to attempt something he'd tried with equivocal results the two sessions just previous. He had Bea Lundeen and me go into Fournais's library to find a picture of a building or ship — any building or ship — in the encyclopedia. Maggie went with us. Bea pulled out volume 14 — KI to LE — and turned to "Kremlin." And there was the great Russian fortress looming above Red Square, the towers of its buildings showing above the massive wall. I nodded, we all looked at it, concentrating, and Bea called out, "O.K., we got one!"

Nothing more happened for about half a minute, and I got pretty fidgety, but we all kept looking at the picture. Then someone called, "Come on out. It's done."

We did. Bea took the encyclopedia to the table and laid it down open, weighting it with an ashtray. Boeltz removed his print, marked it with black grease pencil, and laid it down next to the book.

What was there made my scalp crawl. Jake had given us the Kremlin, all right, but not at all like the picture in the book. There was no broad paved parade ground. Instead, small log buildings were backed up against the fortress wall. The ground was mud, with logs laid in it as a sort of rude and partial paving. There were rows of market booths, and hundreds of people stood or walked around, some mostly naked, a few wearing long coats.

It was a photograph of the Kremlin centuries ago! A photograph of life, not of a painting!

There were some brief, quiet comments, but actually not much was said as people crowded up to look. Everyone seemed to realize the basic significance of it: Jake Savimaki could give pictures from the past, from before photography. This was not a picture of a photograph or thing he'd seen. We were in the presence of something much further beyond the limits of known science than we'd realized — a whole dimension further.

Martin crowded his way to the table and looked without comment,

then silently laid his own print beside the other. Again it showed the same scene from maybe twice as far away. And here the apparent elevation was conspicuous. Boeltz's shot might have been taken from forty or fifty feet above the ground. Martin's was an oblique aerial shot, as if from a low-flying airplane. Except, of course, it wasn't.

Jake had come quietly over, and now he took a look. His eyes didn't change. People looked at him and he didn't seem to notice. It was as if he'd just dropped in and wanted to see what was going on.

My eyes found Boeltz; he was murmuring something quietly to Fournais. Fournais then called a break. In a minute or so their cook appeared with hors d'oevres, and the lid was removed from the punch bowl. Something for people to handle without getting tight. Almost everyone soon had a glass in their hand except Jake. He stood apart, watching the effects he'd caused, and caught my glance with a smile and a nod.

Fournais and Boeltz talked quietly in a corner, then Martin joined them, and Kenmore. I started over to join them too, but some out-of-towner stopped me and asked if I hadn't come in with Mr. Savimaki. By the time I was free, the four of them had left the room.

I felt a hand on my arm, and it was Maggie. "What does he do for an encore?" she asked.

"God knows," I said; *or the Devil,* I added silently. But that was unfair; if anyone around here had a devil, it was Boeltz, not Jake. Jake was as clean as anyone; we went over to him.

"*Kuinka se menee,* Mr. Savimäki?" Maggie asked him.

He grinned. "Pretty good, *tyttö.* How about you?"

"I'm impressed," she said. "Do you know how you did that?"

"Not exactly," he told her. "I just kind of — open myself up. I still don't know what a picture's going to be, but this time I decided I wanted something that would startle people."

"You want to do any more tonight?" I asked him, "or are you tired? We can go home if you'd like."

"No, I feel real good. This gets easier every session. I'd like to see what else I can do. Those last pictures look like something from the past; maybe I can get something from the future next."

I felt my gut give a little twist.

"You know what?" he went on. "I never felt this good before. In my whole life, and most of it ain't been bad." He put his full attention on me then, and called me by my first name for the first time. "Terry, I never thanked you for calling me in that night. I'd hit bottom, and you pulled me back up. I want you to know I appreciate it." He held out a hand big enough for an NFL tackle, and we shook. Then he turned to Maggie with a big grin, and she grinned back, and they shook, too.

We were interrupted; Boeltz, Fournais, Martin, and Kenmore had come back in, Boeltz practically rubbing his hands in anticipation. "Excuse me everyone, if you please," he called, and conversations stopped. "We'd like to continue now."

People quieted down and shuffled themselves into a loose circle. "Do you need to warm up with something easy, Mr. Savimaki?" Boeltz asked. *Courtesy yet!* It was the first time he'd called him "Mr. Savimaki." But his eager eyes were like ice picks.

Jake shook his head and said he was ready. Fournais had his wife take over Martin's camera, and he, Boeltz, and Martin left for the library. Kenmore picked up Boeltz's camera and positioned himself in front of a slightly smiling Jake.

It was a couple of minutes before we heard a voice call, "All right, we've got one."

Jake closed his eyes. No longer was there any effortful concentration, no tightly shut lids. He looked relaxed and confident. "Now," he said. Kenmore clicked his shutter, and so did Liz Fournais, and someone went to get the three from the library. Martin came in with a large book and laid it open on the table. I looked at it while Liz and Kenmore brought their prints over.

It wasn't an encyclopedia, but a book entitled *Weapons in the Sky: Military Applications of Space Technology*. The chapter it was open to was "Soviet Programs." There wasn't even a picture on the page.

Jake had outsmarted them, though. I didn't realize it at the time, but he had. Kenmore laid down his photo, and it was not of some satellite or anything like that. Instead, I saw a car, unidentifiable to me in the darkness, lying on its top in the snow. Liz's photo was the same, from another angle. In hers, I could see a body pinned underneath.

That was the end of the performance. While people donned coats and caps, I took Boeltz aside and collected. He didn't even look irritated with me — "not there" would describe him — then pulled on his gloves and left.

On the way home, nobody talked for the first mile. "Whose car do you suppose that was?" I said at last.

"I don't know," Jake answered. "I just know I didn't want to show them what they wanted, so I just decided to do a picture from the future. And that's what I got."

No one followed up on that until we got home. When we'd hung up our coats and sat down, Maggie decided she needed to know. "Jake," she asked, "could you have shown them? ... What they wanted?"

His eyes were sober. "Get your camera," he told me.

The first picture was of an orbiting space station, like nothing yet built, I'm sure. It was hard to judge size and distance, with nothing familiar as a reference, but it might have been a

hundred feet in diameter, bright against black space, from a viewpoint of maybe a hundred yards away. A red hammer and sickle vivid on its side.

"Holy God!" I said. A whole panorama of potential events began to shape up for me: the CIA moving in, Jake held in some secluded place doing God-knows-what kind of spying for them — and Boeltz, of course, handling Jake. Boeltz would love it; how important he'd feel!

"Take another one," Jake said. "I can see this one, too."

So he was seeing them in advance now. I aimed, he said, "Now," and I shot. It showed Jake strapped down on something like an operating table. He didn't even take the trouble to look at the photo. Maggie's hand found mine.

"You see why I did it," he said, and we both nodded.

The first thing I saw in the *Clarion* the next morning, right on the front page, was a picture of an overturned car. I'd seen one like it the night before. It was Bea Lundeen's. Kemore and Martin had been with her, and Kenmore was dead.

There was nothing in either the *Clarion* or the *Trib* about the session, that day or any other. It was as if they were afraid of it, pushing it out of sight, out of mind, unable to confront what was there.

We didn't hear anything from Boeltz, either, on Sunday. Or on Monday, or for most of the week. Meanwhile, Jake got a job cooking at the Douglas Hotel. He also arranged to move into a room there, but for some reason I talked him out of it.

On Monday evening Maggie came by with her mother, Anna Lahti, who'd driven down from Minnesota to stay a week. She was a good-looking woman about fifty or fifty-five, and she and Jake hit it off right away, talking Finnish. She turned to us and laughed — said she knew he was from Savo as soon as he opened his mouth because he rolled his r's. As if she didn't; when they talked Finnish, it sounded like two chain saws.

It was Friday when Boeltz phoned. He wanted Jake again in half an hour — said I wouldn't need to bring him, that he'd come by and pick him up. I told him he'd have to talk to Jake, and put my hand over the mouthpiece, remembering the picture of Jake strapped down.

"It's Boeltz," I said. "He wants to come and get you in half an hour, for another session. He obviously doesn't want me to be there. I don't trust him; tell him to go to hell."

He smiled and took the phone. "Hello, Dr. Boeltz," he said. "I'm busy tonight, but if you want to make that for tomorrow evening at eight, that will be fine.... At eight, then. I'll be ready." He hung up.

"Jake!" I said, and he grinned. His eyes weren't soft anymore. They looked darker, and bright.

"It's O.K.," he said. "And what you're worried about, it's not going to happen."

"Something's fishy with him," I insisted. "He's hiding something, or I'm not Irish."

He nodded. "It's nothing to worry about, though."

"Do you *know* that?" I asked. "Do you know what he has in mind?"

"I don't know what he has in mind, but it's not dangerous. Not to me." He grinned again then. "And you told me you're only half-Irish. The other half is Dutch."

"And you're half-Swede," I said, trying to insult him. He just laughed; maybe I should have said Russian. Then Anna Lahti drove up. They had a date for supper and an evening at the ice rink.

I watched them drive away; it looked like a romance in the bud. I hoped nothing bad would happen the next evening.

The next night Boeltz was there five minutes early. After he and Jake drove away, I put on my jacket and cap, got in my car, and headed after them for Boeltz's place.

I parked half a block away, then chickened out. I couldn't think of any excuse for going up and pounding on his door, and I didn't want to get arrested for window peeking. So I got the Black Hawks pregame show on the radio and waited. At two minutes into the first period, Marcel Dionne scored on a breakaway. A couple of minutes later, Jake walked out of Boeltz's and started down the sidewalk. I rolled down the window as he approached.

"Want a ride?"

He grinned and got in.

"Care to tell me what happened?"

"Nothing much," he said. "We talked a little bit. But you don't have to worry about my going back."

"Yeah?" I said encouragingly.

"Yeah," he answered cheerfully.

I started the car and pulled away from the curb. "Yeah *what?*" I demanded.

He laughed. "He wanted me to make a picture showing someone dead. His father. He said the old man is dying slowly of an incurable cancer, in terrible pain, and that he'd be grateful to die. He thought if I made a picture of it, it would happen.

"I asked him what his father did for a living, and he said he'd been a banker. You can see what he's after."

"So you told him to go to hell."

"No, I told him I'd see what I could do."

I almost drove up over the curb. "You *what?*"

"Then I gave him a picture of his father as he was at that moment. Playing golf." Jake laughed again. "There were palm trees in the background. Hawaii, I suppose; it's daylight there now."

"What did he say to that?"

"He got all excited, said I'd made a mistake and got something from a

year or two ago."

It was six minutes into the first period. Esposito stopped a Mark Hardy slapshot and fell on Dave Taylor's rebound. Charley Simmer fell on top of Esposito. Hutchinson shoved Simmer.

"Are you sure it wasn't the past?" I asked.

"Positive."

"Then what happened?"

"I told him I'd try once more." He wasn't smiling now. "Maybe I went a little bit too far then."

"What do you mean?"

"Pull over and I'll show you."

He opened his jacket while I pulled off on the shoulder, tires crunching on frozen slush, and handed me a Polaroid color print. There was Herb Boeltz, in a coffin. He didn't look a day older than he had that night at eight o'clock.

"God!" I said. "You wished him dead?"

He shook his head. "I wouldn't do a thing like that," he said soberly. "I just decided to show him a picture of himself dead. I never thought about it looking like it could be next week or something. I just wanted to see how he liked it with the shoe on his own foot. He turned white as a sheet and just kind of fell on the chair. He sat there staring at nothing and never said another thing."

"Do you think it'll come true? This picture?" I asked.

"I don't know," Jake said. "I don't think so, but I'm not sure."

I shifted back into drive again and pulled onto the pavement, half my attention on driving and the other half on the power of suggestion. Boeltz seemed susceptible. He had at least half-convinced himself that Jake could control, as well as predict, the future.

It turned out that Jake's pictures do not fix the form of the future, or even necessarily predict it closely. Though we learned later that they tended to be quite accurate.

But the picture he showed me wasn't correct, any more than Hilton has an e in it. Because the coffin was covered. About four o'clock the next morning, Herb Boeltz put a .38 pistol barrel in his mouth and pulled the trigger, and there wasn't much the mortician could do to make him presentable.

Jake got a room in the hotel, after all. He said he'd been cramping my style, but maybe I'd been cramping his. He remained as cheerful and friendly as ever. Anna Lahti went back to Duluth, put her property up for sale, and moved down, taking an apartment in the same building as Maggie lived in. A couple of months later, she and Jake got married. Maggie and I took a bunch of wedding pictures, and all they showed were Jake and Anna.

I mentioned that to Jake, jokingly, and he said he wasn't doing pictures these days.

They really are a nice couple, and

we went out with them fairly often, despite the age difference. Mostly to dance halls or the ice rink. I even learned to skate, though nowhere nearly as well as all three of them did.

With their example, Maggie and I decided to tie the knot, too. So Lanny was only two and a half years short of his teens; I'd been a teenager once myself. And frankly, he was more likable than I'd been. Jake took a bunch of wedding pictures; he had a brand new Polaroid 680. I couldn't help but wonder. That summer they bought a restaurant and fixed it up really nicely with a Scandinavian motif, bringing a Swede down from Duluth to help with the cuisine. I figured Anna must have had a lot of money, but Maggie said not so far as she'd even known.

Then, one day they asked if we'd like to go to the races that weekend. I supposed they meant at Rockston Downs, only fifty miles away, but instead we *flew* to Maryland! And Jake bought the tickets and rented a car there!

I bet on the same horses he did, and talk about a kick in the tax bracket! We had nothing but winners. A lot of things became clear to me then.

It felt like strange money to me, but the bank was happy with it.

Last evening we celebrated the anniversary of Jake's and my meeting. At their place, a little farm they'd bought just outside town. They'd fixed it up really nicely.

When we got there, I noticed a big book on the table — a folio-sized book on astronomy for the informed layman. Beside it was a brand-new video camera. He told me he had an interesting project going, and asked if we'd care to take a little tour.

(from page 78)

stronger; a flight feather, dark and speckled.

"As friendly as great creatures like that can be," she said.

She heard the children searching downstairs, their muted voices calling softly, "Grandpa, Grandpa." She lay her head on the snow-cold pillow and stroked her cheek with the strong, flecked instrument of release.

"I was born in Philadelphia, where I currently live with my teenage son, Christopher, and two cats," Susan Casper writes. "Fortunately my mother was not really like the title character in my story." Mama, *Ms. Casper's first story for F&SF, deals with a mother who wants* only *the best for her daughter ... and finds a way to get it.*

Mama

BY

SUSAN CASPER

Gloria checked herself in the mirror. She was not beautiful, she knew, but she was pleased with herself. She'd achieved just the right balance between dressy and casual that was needed for Elaine's party. She thought about adding just a touch of lipstick. Most of her friends wore tons of makeup, but she still didn't feel right in it. She decided against putting any on. The blue silk Indian dress went with the natural look. She slipped her feet into her sandals and checked the clock. It was almost time to leave.

The chicken for tomorrow's dinner was still in the freezer. She had promised Mama that she would drop it off on her way to the party. She took it out and put it in a plastic bag. On her way to the door she noticed for the first time how bare the apartment looked without Mick's things in it. He'd even taken most of *her* record collection. Well, she wasn't going to let that ruin the party for her. Good riddance to bad rubbish, only ... only how could he leave *her*, Gloria Brodsky, for a skinny little bitch with green and orange hair and a tattoo on her navel. Gloria shook her head. It must have been the tattoo. Mick thought that they were sexy. He had wanted her to get one, but getting tattooed was so ... final. It *must* have been that tattoo. Sure, Gloria's nose was a little too large, and her hair did tend to frizz up when it rained, but at least her hair was brown.

The phone rang. *Mick,* Gloria thought, and picked up the receiver nervously.

"Oh, so you're alive? I thought maybe you got hit by a truck."

"Hello, Mama," Gloria said, rolling her eyes upward and blowing through her lips.

"I just called to remind you to bring the chicken down. I thought maybe you forgot."

"No, Mama. I was just leaving. I have the chicken right here, see?" she said, holding the bird up to the phone.

"It's O.K., Gloria. Take your time. It doesn't matter what time I get to Mimi's for Mah-jongg. They can wait all night."

"I'll be right there," Gloria said, slamming down the phone. "Right," she said out loud to the empty room. "You really had to wait? As if I didn't have a key." She picked up the chicken and walked out of the apartment.

Mama still lived in the green split-level where Gloria had been raised. The same pink azalea bushes lined the front walk, the same plum tree leaned drunkenly over the lawn. There was always a warm feeling of coming home — until she got to the door. But those same rooms, where she had felt so secure when Daddy was alive, comforted her no more. It was almost eerie seeing those familiar rooms filled with Mama's new rugs, furniture, and wallpaper, as if Mama's alien furnishings rejected her presence.

Mama answered the doorbell so quickly that Gloria suspected she had been waiting just the other side since the phone call. She was dressed to go out, looking as slender and attractive as ever, but she showed no signs of hurry, making it clear that Gloria was expected to come in and talk for a while. Mama offered her cheek and Gloria kissed her, noting with a sudden flood of warmth that even through the henna and Max Factor, Mama's age was beginning to show.

"Your boyfriend's not with you today?" It was not really a question. There was that hint of a smile, a glow in Mama's eyes, as if she knew perfectly well what had happened. Gloria reflected that she probably did. If Mama had a camera hidden in Gloria's apartment, she couldn't know more about what went on there.

"Mick and I broke up," she said, trying to keep her voice steady.

"Another woman?" Mama said, giving her a knowing look. Mama leaned nonchalantly back in her recliner, a woman of leisure, and picked up a piece of needlework that had been lying in the basket at its side. It was the most beautiful piece of needlepoint that Gloria had ever seen — quite unlike the kitschy things that Mama usually did: a gold star on a field of blue with a different Hebrew letter between each of the star's points. She recognized her own Hebrew name, *Gittle*, in Hebrew letters in the star's center.

"What's that?" Gloria asked, in an effort to change the subject.

"It's for your hope chest, Gloria, although I don't have much hope left. After all, you're twenty-three years old. Most of my friends are grandmothers already. But of course as long as you hang around with boys like that Mick person, what can you expect but

tsouris? Haven't I told you for years to find yourself a nice Jewish boy? Someone you can *marry.* A *professional* man from a good family, but would you listen to me? Although what nice man would look at you the way you dress, and no makeup. You're such a *pretty* girl. If only you wouldn't wear your hair pulled back like that, it's so severe. And that dress. It makes you look like a *shiksa.*

"Mrs. Kovner's daughter, little Irenie — you remember Irene? (although she's not so little anymore) — isn't half as pretty as you, but she gets her hair done every week, and the way that kid can put on a face ..."

But Mama, Mick always said that he hated me in makeup.

"Gorgeous, I tell you. And now she's engaged to a lawyer. From Harvard, no less."

Irene Kovner's slept with more men than Xaviera Hollander. One of them was bound to get her pregnant sooner or later.

"Not a long engagement, mind you, but you know how you kids are today. Now if you'd only come to the wedding, her brother Bruce will be there."

Bruce Kovner still wears pomade on his hair and thinks that Barry Manilow is the ultimate in modern music.

"He just finished his internship at Johns Hopkins. He's really quite a catch. It's about time you gave me some *nachus* for a change."

"Mama, I've no intention of dating Bruce Kovner, or going to Irene's wedding. And if I don't leave now, I'm going to be late for my party."

"Oh, really. You're going to a party? And who is throwing this party? Anyone I know?"

Mama always had the power to make Gloria feel as though she had never gotten any older than twelve. She gripped the doorknob tightly, but made no move to turn it and go. "It's Elaine MacReady's party, Mama," she said.

"MacReady? I don't know her. Is she a nice girl? Will there be any, you know, *nice* people there?"

"I didn't ask who was coming, Mama," Gloria said.

"Really, dear. You don't have to shout. If you don't know anyone who's going to be there, why do you want to go?"

"Mama," Gloria said maliciously, "haven't you figured out by now that I *like* to meet strange men. *Very* strange men. Men with tattoos and purple hair. Men who like their women with tattoos. In fact, I think I'll get a tattoo, right here." She pointed at her chest and noted with satisfaction that her mother gasped. Even through the pancake, her mother's face was ashen.

"To mutilate your body, Gloria? You would *do* that? That's against God. I won't permit it."

"You can't stop me," Gloria sneered, and stormed out the door.

As soon as she reached the car, she was sorry. She bit her lip and thought

about going back to apologize ... but no, it was better to let Mama stew a little bit. Mama had been interfering in Gloria's life — and getting away with it — for too long. She examined herself in the rearview mirror. There was color in her cheeks and her eyes blazed a bright, cornflower blue. Maybe the visit with Mama had done her some good. Now if she could only get her stomach to stop churning. She put the key in the ignition and started the motor.

Elaine's parties tended to be large and eclectic: with the dancers gathering down in the basement, where Elaine kept her second-best stereo equipment, but where there was a lot of floor space. In the living room and kitchen, knots of people carried on quiet conversations, while upstairs in the bedrooms the air was blue and pungent from the joints that were passed from hand to hand amid a flurry of giggling. Gloria wished that she could split herself in three. She mixed herself a rum-and-coke from the impromptu bar set up on the kitchen table, and decided to join the talkers for a while. Though she had never been good at parties, especially ones like this where she hardly knew anyone, she was still hot and angry from her mother's lecture, and determined to have exactly the kind of good time that Mama feared she would.

"Gloria! So glad you could make it," Elaine said, putting her arm around Gloria's shoulder and sweeping her up the stairs. "There's someone here I want you to meet."

Upstairs, the herbal smell of marijuana permeated the air. Gloria hadn't smoked the stuff in a long time, but it might be just what she needed. Stoned, maybe she could loosen up enough to forget all about her mother and Mick and just have a good time.

The group sat around the edge of the bed, passing a joint around the circle. Elaine led her into the room and sat her on the edge of the bed next to the most adorable man Gloria had seen in a long time. "Everyone, this is Gloria," Elaine said, then disappeared. Gloria never noticed. She didn't take her eyes off the man next to her long enough to see Elaine leave the room. He was perfect. His hair was black and curly, and his eyes so brown that she could hardly see the pupils. He handed her the joint without interrupting the joke he was telling.

"— says, anything in my kingdom you want. Just name it and it's yours ... but Sir Lancelot was speechless." The group began to laugh.

Gloria smiled and took a deep drag, sucking the smoke into her lungs. And then she felt it — that ominous tickle in the back of her throat. She coughed. A huge blue cloud escaped her lips and hung about her head. She coughed again. And again. Racking, embarrassing coughing that hurt her chest and brought tears to her eyes. A

hand — his, she thought — began to pat her back, and somebody yelled for some water. He thrust the glass under her nose and made her take a sip. The coughing subsided. She wanted to crawl under a bed.

"Are you all right?" he asked; he really looked concerned.

"I'm fine, now," she responded shakily. She began to giggle.

"My name's Augie," he said. He looked so warm, so caring. They smiled shyly at each other. Mick wasn't out of her life for a full day, and already she was in love again.

Gloria woke up feeling warm and dreamy. Augie was gone — she vaguely remembered getting up to let him out — but the pillow still smelled of him, and she hugged it to herself tightly. She wondered how much to tell Mama. Mick had been bad enough, but an *Italian Catholic?* Mama would really *love* this one.

Mama!

It was twelve o'clock already, and she'd promised to be there by one. Mama would have a heart attack. She was still complaining about the last time Gloria had been late on a Sunday, and that was over a year ago. Gloria decided to dress up. A little trick she'd learned after years of trial and error, which would sometimes lay the storm. No time for coffee or breakfast. She'd grab something from Mama's refrigerator. There was barely time to stop on the way to pick up a box of danish.

Someone was with Mama when Gloria arrived. She could hear them talking as soon as she walked in. Strangely enough, the conversation seemed to be in Yiddish, though Gloria couldn't be sure; it ended the minute she approached the kitchen.

"So, Gloria, you made it. I didn't think you were coming. You haven't met Mrs. Votash." The woman seemed a strange companion for Gloria's fastidious, conservative mother. She was about the same age as Mama, and yet somehow she seemed a thousand years older ... she seemed used up, shrunken, wizened. You could almost see the bones of her skull beneath the papery skin of her stolid, expressionless face. She wore a plain black bombazine dress that was faded and caked with dirt; a gray ragged kerchief covered her head. She stared fixedly at Gloria, her eyes as hard as glittering black glass, and then, slowly, she offered her hand. Her hand was black with ancient grime, and her fingernails were long and filthy. Gloria was reluctant to touch the hand, as though it harbored some loathsome disease, and yet she had to take it. The hand was as hard and dry and lifeless as old, dead wood. Then, as if a spell had broken, Mrs. Votash abruptly dropped Gloria's hand, dismissing her; Gloria felt as if she'd been released from a vise. The woman barked an unintelligible word at Mama, who stood and walked her to the door.

Gloria stared at the door in disbe-

lief until her mother came back. "Who on earth was that?" she asked.

"Mrs. Votash is a very religious woman," Mama said. "I've learned a lot from her. I wish that you would show more interest in your religion."

"Well, Mama, if cleanliness is next to godliness, she couldn't get within a mile of him," Gloria snapped. Mama's squint-eyed look was all the answer Gloria needed. She sat down quietly, trying to figure out how to get this outing back on the right foot. This certainly was not the time to bring up Augie.

"I'm sorry, Mama. She just seems a little ... well, different from your other friends. Want me to help you cook?"

"How was your party?" Mama said tonelessly, almost as if she wasn't really interested in an answer.

"I had a wonderful time," Gloria said as she tied on an apron and followed her mother into the kitchen. The chicken was already in the oven and there was little work to be done, but Mama hated to work alone. Gloria opened a can of green beans and poured them into a saucepan. There was a strange, heady smell in the kitchen, and Gloria had to fight back an urge to gag.

"You did something different with the chicken, Mama. It smells funny. Maybe the meat's not any good."

"The meat is fine. It's a new spice that Belle Votash told me about. I thought maybe you're tired of having it the same old way."

"Mama, I always like the way you make chicken." She hoped that Mama wouldn't make a habit of cooking this new way. The smell alone was overpowering, like heavy perfume. It was making her feel quite sick.

"That's my Gloria. I can't do anything to please her. 'Mama, you never want to try anything new,' she always tells me, but when I try something just a little bit different? Then, it's 'Mama, I liked the way you did it before.'"

"Mama ..." Gloria hated it when Mama looked hurt. She would do anything not to see that look in Mama's eyes. She poured herself a glass of water, sipping it slowly in a concentrated effort to keep her stomach under control. It wasn't too bad as long as she didn't have to move around, and she knew that when the time came, she'd swallow the chicken somehow.

Mama brought in the newly finished needlepoint and hung it over the oven door handle like a towel. "Well, what do you think?"

"Ooh," Gloria said. She reached out to touch it.

"Keep your greasy fingers off," Mama said sternly. "It'll be yours soon enough. It's a prayer cloth. I'm going to say a prayer over the chicken; you shouldn't think anything's wrong with it."

Gloria glanced at her mother oddly, wondering about the state of her mental health. Was she *old* enough to be senile? "Mama ..." Was there a special age you hit where your brain sud-

denly turned to putty? Mama waved her arms rhythmically as she began chanting in ... Hebrew? Yiddish? Gloria wasn't sure. "Are you O.K., Mama?" Mama's voice was loud and sonorous, rising and falling in a droning singsong.

"Oh, Mizrach! Oh, Yisroel! Yetzirah bar Yechidah!" Mama continued chanting her strange prayer as Gloria watched in fascination, although the heady smell in the room was making her dizzy and she felt a nervous urge to giggle. Mama seemed to grow and shrink, as though Gloria herself were bobbing about like a helium balloon in the warming currents of air. Mama picked up a box of matzo meal and scattered the contents over the formica tabletop. She grabbed Gloria's glass of water and dipped her forefinger into it ostentatiously. With her moistened finger she began to draw symbols in the sandy mess. A large circle ... a Star of David centered inside ... and in the middle she drew



It was a symbol that Gloria had never seen before.

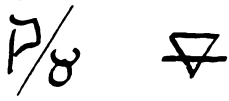
Mama scratched Gloria's Hebrew name to the left of the star's top point: a diagonal slash, then a word Gloria didn't recognize above it. To the right of the point she put a circle with a dot in the center.

"Shamah Seraph," Mama said as she sketched.



on the right side of the star. She paused to turn on the flame of one of the burners, and to run her hand quickly through it.

"Shemah Kerub," she called, sketching



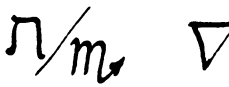
and grabbed a pinch of soil from one of her plants. She sprinkled it on the floor of the oven.

"Shamah Ariel," she shouted, drawing



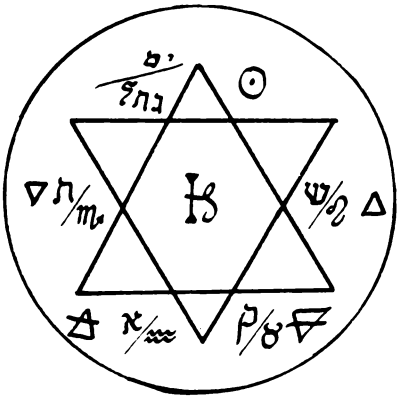
then picked up the needlepoint and used it to fan the inside of the oven. A wave of heat caught Gloria full in the face, but she could not turn away.

"Shamah Tharsis," Mama said at last, making a final etching of



in the last remaining empty space. She picked up the glass of water and poured it onto the heated oven. A cloud of steam escaped the oven door, but it did not dissipate as it expanded. Instead, it filled the entire room, heavy and redolent with the odor of cooking chicken. Gloria could no longer see her mother, could barely hear her over the

loud hiss that seemed to go on forever. All that she could see was the completed hexagram on the table.



She heard her name called several times, but it didn't seem to matter anymore. Enveloped by the sauna, nothing was real.

"Here, honey, have a taste of this." The cloud was gone. Mama handed her a piece of meat from the chicken that was sitting on a platter in the middle of the table. "It'll make you feel better." And Gloria found to her surprise that it did seem to have a healing effect.

"So, it's good?" Mama asked. Gloria nodded agreement. "Some things, like liver, they don't smell so good when they cook. But does that mean they have to taste bad?" Mama served the dinner onto two plates and handed one to Gloria. "You should nap more often. You look much better now. Listen, I think we'd better eat quickly. Bruce Kovner is coming by after dinner to pick up the present I got for his sister. I'm sure you'll want to spruce up before he gets here. Such a nice, handsome man. You know where I keep my makeup?"

"The blue bag under the sink, right? Mama, do you have any mascara?"

The doorbell rang just as they were dishing out dessert. "I'll get it, Mama," Gloria said, pausing to check her hair in the glass front of the china cabinet. She pulled open the door.

"Gloria?" Bruce said, and then he smiled. Gloria smiled back. How could she ever have been so stupid. Bruce Kovner was so handsome; everything she had always wanted in a man — and thinking back, he always had been.

After dinner, Mama refused to let Gloria help her clean up. Bruce had invited her to a movie. "You children have a good time," Mama said, then whispered confidentially in Gloria's ear, "I made an appointment for you with my own hairdresser Tuesday. I think he can make you a regular. And remember, when Bruce gets around to asking, don't be coy. You're already twenty-three."

"Mama, you're wonderful," Gloria said, and gave the older woman a hug and kiss. Then she took Bruce's arm and let him lead her out of the house.

"My son, the doctor," she heard Mama say as she shut the door.

The nod here is to archy and mehitabel's Don Marquis and Krazy Kat's George Herriman in this latest in O. Niemand's series of SF pastiches.



the artist passes it by

boss here i am
on springfield
this big green dome
on a rock in the middle
of nowhere
don t ask me
how i got here
i was just looking
to get in out of the rain
and the next thing i know i
am spending three months
in the belly of a freighter
tiptoeing through space

i ran into our friend
the bohemian lady cat
in this place here
they call the old quarter
the old quarter of what they
won t tell me or where
they ve thrown the other three quarters
but anyway
it won t surprise you to learn
that the old quarter

is where the feline dancer
has taken up residence it
reminds me of her digs at home
only shabbier dirtier and more
odiferous
i have nosed around here says
the lady cat
it s a stimulating place
for an artist like myself
but i think i ll go home
in a while

first i saw a place
she says
that claimed it was the
ultimate dining experience i
sampled of their cuisine
in the garbage in the alley
it made me sad to think
flameworm chowder
will always be downhill
from there
another place advertised the
ultimate in holodot fidelity
well says she
you know that fidelity
has never been
a major concern in my
pursuit of happiness so
i walked on
until i saw
in fiery big letters
metasense
the ultimate experience

* * *

i didn't go in sniffs
our feline friend
if i want
to be disappointed
by the ultimate experience
i will just wait
for my next honeymoon
toujours gai kid toujours gai

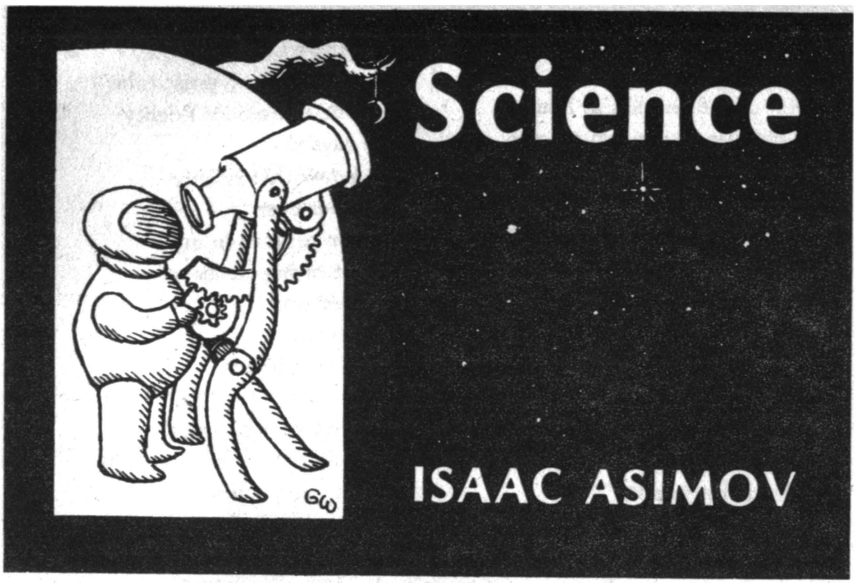
— *O. Niemand*

Coming soon

Next month: "The Blister," a new novella by **Frederik Pohl,** another in his future history of New York, about the construction of a bubble over the island of Manhattan.

October: 35th anniversary issue, with new stories by **Ben Bova, Damon Knight, George Alec Effinger, Ed Bryant, James Gunn, Marion Zimmer Bradley** and others.

Use the coupon on page 128.



COMING FULL CIRCLE

During the autumn of 1983, I grew fascinated by the currently very popular bypass operations, and for a very good reason, too. My angina, which had been minor and stable for six years, had suddenly flared up. There were tests, and once I was carefully exposed to the results of those tests, I realized I had those most interesting of alternatives — none.

I was going to need a triple bypass.

So I inquired of my various doctors, and there seemed to be one question they didn't hear me ask. At least they always launched into some other answer.

Finally, I cornered my anesthesiologist.

I said, "There is one thing I don't understand. If you're going to insert an artery or vein into my aorta and into my coronary arteries so that the blood will be led around the constriction, how do you do that? Short of making use of the fourth dimension, you're going to have to cut into the aorta, for instance, and make a round hole into which you can fit the new vessel."

"Well, yes."

"And at the first cut," I said, "the blood gushes out in a tremendous flood and I die."

"Oh, *no*," he said. "Hasn't anyone explained? After we expose your heart, we *stop* it."

I felt myself turn a pretty shade of green. "You *stop* it?"

"Yes, we give it a heavy slug of potassium ion and cool it, and it stops beating."

"But that leaves me five minutes from brain death."

"No, it doesn't. You will be fitted to a heart-lung machine that will keep you going for hours, if necessary."

"What if it breaks down?"

"It won't. And if there's a power breakdown all over the northeast, we continue untouched on our emergency generators."

I felt a *little* better, and said, "How do you start the heart again? What if it won't start?"

"That can't happen," he said confidently. "The heart wants to do nothing but start. We have to work hard to keep it still. As soon as we let the potassium wash out, it starts right in again, especially one that's in as good shape as yours."

He was right. The triple bypass took place on 14 December 1983, and on 2 January 1984, I celebrated my 1,000,000th birthday (on the binary scale) and here, on 8 January 1984, I begin another essay. And what ought I to discuss but the heart and blood vessels?

Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) thought the heart was the seat of the intelligence. That wasn't as unreasonable as it sounds today. After all, it is a constantly moving organ that speeds up during excitement, slows down in periods of calm, is tumultuous when one's affections are engaged and so on. Anyone observing this and then noting that the brain just sits there and does nothing is likely to dismiss the brain as, at best, an auxiliary organ.

Aristotle thought it was merely a cooling agent for the heart, which would otherwise overheat. The cooling was done by a saliva-like fluid, which the Greeks called "pituita" (the first syllable of which gives us our onomatopoetic word "spit"). There is still a small organ at the base of the brain called the "pituitary gland," which is extremely important (another essay, some day, perhaps) but which has nothing to do with spit.

Aristotle did not distinguish between veins, arteries, nerves, and sinews.

Soon after Aristotle's death, however, there came a short period of

clever dissection in Alexandria, Egypt, and matters began to straighten out somewhat.

The arteries, for instance, were clearly connected to the heart, but in dead bodies the large arteries seemed empty. (The last pulsation cleared them of blood.) Praxagorus (340-? B.C.) made the logical suggestion, therefore, that they carried air. In fact, the word "artery" is from a Greek term meaning "air-duct."

Herophilus (320-? B.C.) a student of Praxagorus, distinguished between arteries and veins and noted that the arteries pulsed and veins did not. He seemed to have believed the arteries carried blood, but he kept the name his teacher had given them.

Herophilus' disciple, Erasistratus (304-250 B.C.) belived that the veins, arteries, and nerves were all hollow tubes that carried one fluid or another to the various parts of the body; that they divided and subdivided till they were too small to see. In all this, he was remarkably close, since even the nerves carry an electric impulse, which can be looked upon as a subtle sort of fluid.

The veins, all agreed, carried blood. ("Vein" is from the Latin, "vena." The Greek word is "phleb," which is why inflammation of the veins is called "phlebitis.")

Some thought the arteries contained a mixture of blood and air, or of blood and some "vital spirit," and if we think of the arteries as carrying oxygenated blood, which they do, we find the old Greeks were *not* making unintelligent guesses.

Still, puzzles remained, and it was centuries before medical men clearly understood that nerves and tendons had nothing to do with the heart and were not blood vessels of any type. Nor did they get the difference between veins and arteries entirely clear.

Galen, the most renowned of ancient physicians, a Greek of Roman times (130-200), thought the arteries originated in the heart and led to the various tissues. He thought the veins originated in the liver, went from there to the heart from which, again, they were led to the various tissues. (Not an unintelligent guess, actually. The liver is a large organ that is full of blood vessels, and, whereas the arteries beat as the heart does, the veins remain quiescent as the liver does.)

Galen believed that the blood poured out of the heart through arteries and veins alike and was consumed by the tissues. New blood was continually manufactured, he thought, in the liver (presumably out of food), as fast as it was consumed in the tissues. The blood was consumed in the

tissues as wood would be in fireplace. The air we breathed stoked the process, and the air we exhaled was analogous to the smoke of a fire.

There is a catch, though. The heart is not a simple pump. It is in fact, two pumps, since it is divided into two chief chambers: the "left ventricle" and the "right ventricle." ("Ventricle" is from Latin for "little pouch.")

Each thick-walled ventricle has a thin-walled ante-chamber, called the "left atrium" and "right atrium" respectively, so the heart has four chambers altogether.

There is a clear passage between each atrium and its ventricle but none between the two sets of atria-ventricles. The left ventricle (very muscular) leads to the largest artery in the body, the "aorta" (a name of uncertain origin) while the right ventricle (less muscular) leads to the pulmonary artery. Each ventricle has its own veins, too.

It would seem that each ventricle sends out blood and that there is no obvious connection between the two bloodstreams. Galen, however, could not see why there would be two bloodstreams and decided that made no sense. There must be a connection, and if not an obvious one then a hidden one.

The wall between the two ventricles is thick and muscular and, to all appearances, absolutely intact. Nevertheless, Galen reasoned, there must be tiny holes in it, holes too small to see, through which blood was transferred back and forth from one ventricle to the other, thus allowing there to be a single bloodstream.

For something like fourteen centuries, physicians faithfully believed in the inter-ventricular pores, although no one saw them, and though they do not, in actual fact, exist. But don't be too ready to laugh. They made sense in Galen's system, and even though the system proved wrong, the correct system, when it came along, also depended on invisible passages.

There was no chance of making progress, however, on the matter of the heart and blood vessels until human anatomy was established as a firm medical discipline. This was difficult because so many people considered the dissection of corpses (I'm not talking about the vivisection of living bodies) to be blasphemous. The Egyptians, Jews, and, eventually, Christians, were alike horrified at the practice, and anatomy died out after 200 B.C. and was restricted to animals for a thousand years.

The first great modern medical schools in Europe were established in Renaissance Italy, and they led the western world for three centuries. At the University of Bologna, Mondino de Luzzi (1275-1326) was the first to

conduct systematic dissections. In 1316, he published the first book in history to be devoted entirely to anatomy. Unfortunately, he had assistants do the dissection, while he did the lecturing (without looking) from Galenic principles. He made egregious errors, therefore, but for two and a half centuries, his remained the best book available.

(Incidentally, the growth of interest in naturalistic art in Renaissance Italy, made anatomy an artistic necessity, jsut as it made projective geometry one. Art thus contributed to medicine and mathematics, while each of these, in turn, contributed to art. There are intellectual and technological connections everywhere in history. Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) dissected thirty cadavers in the course of his life.)

Finally, there came along the first great modern anatomist, a Fleming named Andreas Vesalius (1514-1564). He studied in the Italian medical schools and grew fascinated by anatomy. He managed to create a sensation, for instance, by showing that men and women had equal numbers of ribs — twenty-four each, arranged in twelve pairs.

After all, the Bible said that Eve was created out of a rib taken from Adam — from which it followed that there had to be one missing not only in Adam, but in all men. Everyone "knew" that without having to look — until Vesalius went and looked and, what was worse, counted.

As a result of his researches, Vesalius put together one of the great classics of scientific history, entitled, in English, "On the Structure of the Human Body." It was published in 1543, when he was 29 years old, and that was the same year in which Copernicus published his book explaining that the Earth went round the Sun and not vice-versa. It was a double whammy for Greek science.

Vesalius's book was the first reasonably accurate book on anatomy, and it was *printed*. This meant it could have illustrations that could be reproduced accurately any number of times, and Vesalius managed to get a first-class artist to do them, one Jan Stephen van Calcar (1499-1550), a pupil of the artist Titian (1477-1576). The illustrations were naturalistic, and those of the muscles, in particular, have never been done better.

Older, more conservative anatomists objected strenuously to the book, simple because they couldn't let go of Galen. Twenty years later, they managed to help get Vesalius accused of heresy, body-snatching and dissection. He was forced to go on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land as penance and died in the course of a storm.

However, even Vesalius did not abandon Galen altogether. He was for Galen and against Aristotle in favoring the brain over the heart as the seat

of the intelligence — and no one has doubted the matter since.

Furthermore, Vesalius could find no way, in his anatomical researches, of explaining the double-pump nature of the heart other than Galen did. He therefore accepted the invisible pores through the inter-ventricular wall of the heart, though toward the end of his life, he is supposed to have grown doubtful about it.

Despite Vesalius's troubles with the establishment of his day, he revolutionized anatomy. After him, anatomists dissected carefully and studied what they saw in detail.

One of these was Girolamo Fabrici, 1533-1619, (usually better known as Fabricius ab Aquapendente). In 1574, he studied the leg veins and noted that they had little valves along their length. Other anatomists of the time also reported on them, and there were vigorous disputations over priority.

Fabrici, however, did the most careful and thorough study, and he allowed one of his students to publish illustrations of these valves in 1585, so Fabrici usually gets the credit for the discovery.

Fabrici, however, did not interpret their function correctly. He was still enslaved to the notion of the Galenic inter-ventricular pores, which allowed a single bloodstream to move out, centrifugally, from the heart to the tissues where it was consumed.

It was clear that the valves prevented the blood from flowing downward in the veins. Muscular action, during walking and other movements, squeezed the leg veins and other veins in the lower body and forced the blood upward because that was the only direction in which it could go. If it tried to go downward, in the direction of gravitational pull, the valves caught it.

This meant that the blood in the leg veins and, possibly, in all veins, could move *toward the heart only.*

Fabrici, however, couldn't accept that, despite the fact that (in hindsight) it is plainly so. He assumed the valves merely slowed and equalized the downward flow of blood so that all parts of the body got their fair share. In doing this, Fabrici saved the Galenic theory of heart action but lost immortality.

Did no one question the Galenic pores?

Some did certainly, but the first to do so was not a European. He was an Arabic scholar, Ibn al-Nafis (1210-1288), born near Damascus.

In 1242, he wrote a book on surgery, and, in it, he specifically denied the existence of the Galenic pores. The inter-ventricular wall, he said, was

thick and solid, and there was no way for blood to get through it.

And yet blood had to get from one side of the wall to the other, somehow. A double pump made no sense.

Al-Nafis suggested that the blood from the right ventricle was pumped into the pulmonary artery that led it to the lungs. There, in the lungs, it divided into smaller and smaller vessels, within which the blood picked up air from the lungs. The vessels were then collected into larger and larger vessels until they emptied into the pulmonary veins that carried the blood, together with its air-mixture, into the left atrium and from that into the left ventricle and out the aorta.

Al-Nafis, in this way, discovered "the lesser circulation" of the blood, and the picture was an interesting one. The blood (created in the liver, perhaps, as Galen thought) poured into the right atrium and right ventricle, then travelled to the left atrium and left ventricle by way of the lungs. Then, aerated, the blood travelled to the tissues generally.

In this way, you got rid of the Galenic pores and explained the reason for the double pump. It was a way of insuring that the blood picked up air before going to the tissues generally.

There were two catches to al-Nafis' theories, however. In the first place, there were no signs of continuous blood vessels through the lungs. The pulmonary artery divided and subdivided till it disappeared, while the pulmonary veins formed out of apparent nothingness. It was fair to suppose that the final subdivisions grew too small to see and that the tiniest arteries and veins were thus connected. However, if that were done, invisible vessels replaced invisible pores. Was that really an improvement?

The second catch was that al-Nafis' book did not become known to the West until 1924 (!), and therefore had no influence on the development of modern medical theory.

It took a little over three hundred years for Europe to catch up to al-Nafis' insight, and the one who did it was a Spanish physician, Michael Servetus (1511-1553).

Those were the days of the Protestant Reformation, and all Europe was convulsed with theological discussions. Servetus developed radical notions that would today be described as Unitarian. He advanced them tactlessly, infuriating both Catholics and Protestants, since both were committed to the divinity of Jesus. In 1536, Servetus met John Calvin in Paris. John Calvin was one of the most noted of the early Protestants, a firm and dour doctrinaire. When Servetus sent Calvin a copy of his views, Calvin was horrified and broke off the correspondence — but did not forget.

In 1553, Servetus published his theological views anonymously, but Calvin knew those views and recognized the author. Calvin transmitted the knowledge to the French authorities who arrested Servetus. Servetus managed to escape three days later and headed for Italy.

Foolishly, he went by way of nearby Geneva, then under the strict control of the dark and bitter Calvin, who had set up one of the more notable theocracies of modern Europe. Servetus was not a subject or resident of Geneva and had committed no crime in Geneva for which he could be legally held. Nevertheless, Calvin insisted on having him condemned to death, so that Servetus — crying out his Unitarian doctrine to the end — was burned at the stake.

Calvin was not satisfied with burning Servetus' body. It seemed to him necessary to burn his mind, too. He hunted down all the thousand copies of Servetus' book he could find and had them burned as well. It was not until 1694, a century and a half after Servetus' death, that some unburned copies were discovered, and European scholars had a chance to read his Unitarian views.

This they did, and found to their astonishment perhaps, that he had also decribed the lesser circulation in the book (exactly as al-Nafis had done, if Europe had only known).

Servetus lost the credit for the discovery, except in hindsight, for in 1559, an Italian anatomist, Realdo Colombo (1510-1559), published a book that described the lesser circulation, just as al-Nafis and Servetus had done, and this work survived. Colombo generally gets the credit for the discovery, but then his work was more detailed and careful than that of the other two, and, through circumstance, it was Colombo's work that influenced further developments so his credit is deserved.

Then came the English physician, William Harvey (1578-1657).

He was the son of a well-to-do businessman (the oldest of nine children) who received his degree at Cambridge in 1597 and then went to Italy to study medicine. There, Fabrici was one of his teachers.

Harvey returned to England to great success, for he was court physician to both King James I and King Charles I.

Harvey was an experimenter. To him, the heart was a muscle that was ceaselessly contracting and pushing out blood and was to be investigated on that basis and no other.

By actual dissection, he studied the valves between the two atria and the two ventricles carefully, and noticed they were one-way. Blood could

travel from the left atrium to the left ventricle and from the right atrium to the right ventricle, but not vice versa.

What's more, Harvey knew of course of the venous valves that his old teacher Fabrici had reported on. With the concept of one-way valves clearly in his mind, he avoided Fabrici's mistake. The blood in the veins went in one direction only, toward the heart. He experimented by actually tying off veins in the course of animal experiments. Inevitably, the blood filled and bulged the vein on the side away from the heart as it tried to flow toward the heart and couldn't flow away. The situation was precisely reversed when he tied off an artery, which at once filled and bulged with blood on the side toward the heart.

By 1615, matters were clear to Harvey. He finally knew the physiological differences between arteries and veins. Blood left the heart by way of the arteries and returned to the heart by way of the veins. The lesser circulation that Colombo had talked about was *only* the lesser. From the left ventricle, the blood was pumped out into the aorta and went to all the tissues of the body generally, returning by veins to the right atrium and ventricle, from which it was pumped out to the lungs to return to the left atrium and ventricle.

In other words, the blood is constantly coming full circle. It "circulates."

Harvey did some simple calculations that Galen might conceivably have done, if the notion of measurement in connection with biology had been clear to the Greeks. Harvey showed that in one hour, the heart pumped out a quantity of blood that was three times the weight of a man. It seemed inconceivable that blood would be formed and consumed at that rate, so that the notion of the circulation of the blood seemed a logical necessity as well as an experimental one.

Harvey, who was not a controversialist, began lecturing on the circulation of the blood in 1616, but didn't put it into book form until 1628. He then produced a 72-page book, miserably printed in the Netherlands on thin, cheap paper, and full of typographical errors. However, the experiments it described were clear, concise, and elegant, and the conclusions were incontrovertible. The book (called, in English, "On the Motions of the Heart and Blood") therefore became one of the great scientific classics.

Harvey's book was (inevitably) hooted down at first, but he lived long enough to see the circulation of the blood accepted by European medicine generally. It was his book that was the final once-and-for-all ending of Galenic physiology.

And yet there was a catch. The blood was carried outward from the

heart by the arteries, and carried back by the veins, but there were no visible connections between the two. One had to assume the existence of invisible connections, little tubes too small to see — like the invisible Galenic pores in the inter-ventricular muscle.

As long as we must depend on invisibility, we are not certain.

Ah, but now there was a difference. In Harvey's last decade of life, physiologists were beginning to use microscopes that were very imperfect but that could magnify tiny objects, ordinarily too small to see, and make them visible in some detail.

First in the field by a little was the Italian physiologist, Marcello Malpighi, who had been trained in medicine at the University of Bologna, and who eventually rose to become, rather reluctantly, private physician to Pope Innocent XII. Malpighi began his work in microscopy in the 1650s when he investigated the lungs of frogs. He began to see tiny hair-like blood vessels he couldn't see without the microscope. By observing the wing membranes of bats under his microscope in 1661, he could actually see tiny arteries and tiny veins connected by such hair-like vessels. He call-

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ed them "capillaries" from the Latin word meaning "hair-like."

The discovery, which completed and made perfect the concept of the circulation of the blood, was made four years (alas) after Harvey's death, but I'm quite sure that Harvey was confident that capillaries existed and would be discovered.

One last item. When the heart's left ventricle pumps its blood into the huge aorta, three small arteries come off it almost immediately, taking the most freshly-oxygenated blood to — where else? — the heart muscle itself. The heart helps itself first and most richly, and why not? It deserves it.

These vessels are the "coronary arteries," (because they encircle the heart like coronets). Even more so than ordinary arteries, the coronaries have a tendency to clog with cholesterol, if one eats and lives foolishly.

The clogging is usually just at the place where the arteries branch off from the aorta, and tests showed that my coronaries (in order of decreasing size) were clogged 85 percent, 70 percent, and 100 percent.

The largest coronary was bypassed by a nearby artery (fortunately perfectly usable). The two smaller ones were bypassed by a vein taken from my left leg. I am scarred and not yet totally healed, but my heart is getting all the blood it needs; I am healing rapidly, and, by far the most important, I can still write my essays.

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Stephen Donaldson published a couple of stories here about five years ago, went on to win the John Campbell award as best new writer and author a series of bestselling fantasy novels, THE CHRONICLES OF THOMAS COVENANT. His most recent book is DAUGHTER OF REGALS (Del Rey), and he makes a welcome return to these pages with a suspenseful tale about an encounter in deep space.

What Makes Us Human

BY
STEPHEN R. DONALDSON

Aster's Hope stood more than a hundred meters tall — a perfect sphere bristling with vanes, antennas, and scanners, punctuated with laser points, viewscreens, and receptors. She left her orbit around her homeworld like a steel ball out of a slingshot, her sides bright in the pure sunlight of the solar system. Accelerating toward her traveling speed of 0.85c, she moved past the outer planets — first Philomel with its gigantic streaks of raw, cold hydrogen; then lonely Periwinkle glimmering at the edge of the spectrum — on her way into the black and luminous beyond. She was the best her people had ever made, the best they knew how to make. She had to be: she wasn't coming back for centuries.

There were exactly 392 people aboard.

They, too, were the best Aster had to offer. Diplomats and meditechs, linguists, theoretical biologists, physicists, scholars, even librarians for the vast banks of knowledge *Aster's Hope* carried: all of them had been trained to the teeth especially for this mission. And they included the absolute cream of Aster's young Service, the so-called " 'puters" and " 'nicians" who knew how to make *Aster's Hope* sail the fine-grained winds of the galaxy. Three hundred ninety-two people in all, culled and tested and prepared from the whole population of the planet to share in the culmination of Aster's history.

Three hundred ninety of them were asleep.

The other two were supposed to be taking care of the ship. But they weren't. They were running naked down a mid-shell corridor between the clean, impersonal chambers where the cryogenic capsules hugged their occupants. Temple was giggling because

she knew Gracias was never going to catch her unless she let him. He still had some of the ice cream she'd spilled on him trickling through the hair on his chest, but if she didn't slow down, he wasn't going to be able to do anything about it. Maybe she wasn't smarter or stronger than he was, better trained or higher-ranking — but she was certainly faster.

This was their duty shift, the week they would spend out of their capsules every half year until they died. *Aster's Hope* carried twenty-five shifts from the Service, and they were the suicide personnel of this mission: aging at the rate of one week twice every year, none of them were expected to live long enough to see the ship's return home. Everyone else could be spared until *Aster's Hope* reached its destination; asleep for the whole trip, they would arrive only a bit more mature than they were when they left. But the Service had to maintain the ship. And so the planners of the mission had been forced to a difficult decision: Either fill *Aster's Hope* entirely with 'puters and 'nicians and pray that they would be able to do the work of diplomats, theoretical physicists, and linguists; or sacrifice a certain number of Service personnel to make room for people who could be explicitly trained for the mission. The planners decided that the ability to take *Aster's Hope* apart chip by chip and seal after seal and then put her all back together again was enough expertise to ask of any individual man or woman. Therefore, the mission itself would have to be entrusted to other experts.

And therefore, *Aster's Hope* would be unable to carry enough 'puters and 'nicians to bring the mission home again.

Faced with this dilemma, the Service personnel were naturally expected to spend a significant period of each duty shift trying to reproduce. If they had children, they could pass on their knowledge and skill. And if the children were born soon enough, they would be old enough to take *Aster's Hope* home when she needed them.

Temple and Gracias weren't particularly interested in having children. But they took every aspect of reproduction very seriously.

She slowed down for a few seconds, just to tantalize him. Then she put on a burst of speed. He tended to be just a bit dull in his lovemaking — and even in his conversation — unless she made a special effort to get his heart pounding. On some days, a slow, comfortable, and just-a-bit-dull lover was exactly what she wanted. But not today. Today she was full of energy from the tips of her toes to the ends of her hair, and she wanted Gracias at his best.

But when she tossed a laughing look back over her shoulder to see how he was doing, he wasn't behind her anymore.

Where—? Well, good. He was trying to take control of the race. Win by

tricking her because he couldn't do it with speed. Temple laughed out loud while she paused to catch her breath and think. Obviously, he had ducked into one of the rooms or passages off this corridor, looking for a way to shortcut ahead of her — or maybe to lure her into ambush. And she hadn't heard the automatic door open and close because she'd been running and breathing too hard. Very good! This was the Gracias she wanted.

But where had he turned off? Not the auxilliary compcom: that room didn't have any other exit. How about the nearest capsule chamber? From there, he'd have to shaft down to inner-shell and come back up. That would be dicey: he'd have to guess how far and fast, and in what direction, she was moving. Which gave her a chance to turn the tables on him.

With a grin, she went for the door to the next capsule chamber. Sensing her approach, it opened with a nearly silent whoosh, then closed behind her. Familiar with the look of the cryogenic capsules huddled in the grasp of their triple-redundant support machinery, each one independently supplied and run so that no system-wide failure could wipe out the mission, she hardly glanced around her as she headed toward the shaft.

Its indicators showed that it wasn't in use. So Gracias wasn't on his way up here. Perfect. She'd take the shaft up to the outer-shell and elude him there, just to whet his appetite. Turn his own gambit against him. Pleased with herself, she approached the door of the shaft.

But when she impinged on the shaft's sensor, it didn't react to her. None of the lights came on: the elevator stayed where it was. Surprised, she put her whole body in front of the sensor. Nothing. She jumped up and down, waved her arms. Still nothing.

That was strange. When Gracias ran his diagnostics this morning, the only malfunction anywhere was in an obscure circuit of foodsup's beer synthesizer. And she'd already helped him fix it. Why wasn't the shaft opening?

Thinking she ought to go to the next room and try another shaft, find out how serious the problem was, Temple trotted back to the capsule chamber door.

This time, it didn't open for her.

That was so unexpected that she ran into the door — which startled more than hurt her. In her nearly thirty years, she had never seen an automatic door fail. All doors opened except locked doors; and locked doors had an exterior status light no one could miss. Yet the indicators for this door showed *open* and *normal.*

She tried again.

The door didn't open.

That wasn't just strange. It was serious. A severe malfunction. Which didn't show up on diagnostics? Or had it just now happened? Either way, it was time to stop playing. *Aster's Hope* needed help. Frowning, Temple looked

for the nearest speaker so she could call Gracias and tell him what was going on.

It was opposite her, on the wall beside the shaft. She started toward it.

Before she got there, the door to the chamber slid open.

A nonchalant look on his dark face, a tuneless whistle puckering his mouth, Gracias came into the room. He was carrying a light sleeping pallet over one shoulder. The door closed behind him normally.

"Going somewhere?" he asked in a tone of casual curiosity.

Temple knew that look, that tone. In spite of herself, she gave him a wide grin. "Damn you all to pieces," she remarked. "How did you do that?"

He shrugged, trying to hide the sparkle in his eyes. "Nothing to it. Auxcompcom's right over there." He nodded in the direction of the comp command room she had passed. "Ship motion sensors knew where you were. Saw you come in here. Did a temporary repro. Told the comp not to react to any body mass smaller than mine. You're stuck in here for another hour."

"You ought to be ashamed." She couldn't stop grinning. His ploy delighted her. "That's the most irresponsible thing I've ever heard. If the other 'puters spend their time doing repros, the comp won't be good for alphabet soup by the time we get where we're going."

He didn't quite meet her happy gaze. "Too late now." Still pretending he was nonchalant — in spite of some obvious evidence to the contrary — he put the pallet on the floor in front of him. "Stuck here for another hour." Then he did look at her, his black eyes smoldering. "Don't want to waste it."

She made an effort to sound exasperated. "Idiot." But she practically jumped into his arms when he gave her the chance.

They were still doing their duty when the ship's brapper sounded and the comp snapped *Aster's Hope* onto emergency alert.

Temple and Gracias were, respectively, the 'nician and 'puter of their duty shift. The Service had trained them for their jobs almost from birth. They had access, both by education and through the comp, to the best knowledge Aster had evolved, the best resources her planners and builders had been able to cram into *Aster's Hope*. In some ways, they were the pinnacle of Aster's long climb toward the future: they represented, more surely than any of the diplomats or librarians, what the Asterins had been striving toward for three thousand years.

But the terms themselves, " 'nician" and " 'puter," were atavisms, pieces of words left over from before the Crash — sounds that had become at once magic and nonsense during the period of inevitible barbarism that had fol-

lowed the Crash. Surviving legends spoke of the 'puters and 'nicians who had piloted the great colonization ship *Aster* across the galactic void from Earth, light-years measured in hundreds or thousands from the homeworld of the human race. In *Aster*, as in the great ships that Earth had sent out, striving to preserve humankind from some now-forgotten crisis, most of the people had slept through the centuries of space-normal travel while the 'nicians and 'puters had spent their lives and died, generation after generation, to keep the ship safe and alive as the comp and its scanners hunted the heavens for some world where *Aster*'s sleepers could live.

It was a long and heroic task, that measureless vigil of the men and women who ran the ship. In one sense, they succeeded; for when *Aster* came to her last resting-place, it was on the surface of a planet rich in compatible atmosphere and vegetation but almost devoid of competitive fauna. The planet's sun was only a few degrees hotter than Sol; its gravity, only a fraction heavier. The people who found their way out of sleep onto the soil and hope of the new world had reason to count themselves fortunate.

But in another sense the 'nicians and 'puters failed. While most of her occupants slept, *Aster* had been working for hundreds or thousands of years — and entrophy was immutable. Parts of the ship broke down. The 'puters and 'nicians made repairs. Other parts broke down and were fixed. And then *Aster* began to run low on supplies and equipment. The parts that broke down were fixed at the expense of other parts. The 'nicians and 'puters kept their ship alive by nothing more in the end than sheer ingenuity and courage, but they couldn't keep her from crashing.

The Crash upset everything the people of Earth had planned for the people of *Aster*. The comp was wrecked, its memory banks irretrievable, useless. Fires destroyed what physical books the ship carried. The pieces of equipment that survived tended to be ones that couldn't be kept running without access to an ion generator and couldn't be repaired without the ability to manufacture microchips. *Aster*'s engines had flared out under the strain of bringing her bulk down through the atmosphere and were cold forever.

Nearly nine hundred men and women survived the Crash, but they had nothing to keep themselves alive with except the knowledge and determination they carried in their own heads.

That the descendants of those pioneers survived to name their planet Aster — to make it yield up first a life and then a future, to dream of the stars and space flight and Earth — was a tribute more to their determination than to their knowledge. A significant portion of what they knew was of no conceivable value. The descendants of the original 'puters and 'nicians knew how

to run *Aster*; but the theoretical questions involved in how she had run were scantly understood. And none of those personnel had been trained to live in what was essentially a jungle. As for the sleepers: according to legend, a full 10 percent of them had been politicians. And another 20 percent had been people the politicians deemed essential — secretaries, press officers, security guards, even cosmeticians. That left barely six hundred individuals who were accustomed to living in some sort of contact with reality.

And yet they found a way to live.

First they survived: by experimentation (some of it fatal), they learned to distinguish edible from inedible vegetation; they remembered enough about the importance of fire to procure some from *Aster's* remains before the wreckage burned itself out; they organized themselves enough to assign responsibilities.

Later they persisted: they found rocks and chipped them sharp in order to work with the vegetation; they made clothing out of leaves and the skins of small animals; they taught themselves how to weave shelter; they kept their population going.

Next they struggled. After all, what good did it do them to have a world if they couldn't fight over it?

And eventually, they began to reinvent the knowledge they had lost.

The inhabitants of Aster considered all this a slow process. From their point of view, it seemed to take an exceptionally long time. But judged by the way planetary civilizations usually evolved, Asterin history moved with considerable celerity. A thousand years after the Crash, Aster's people had remembered the wheel. (Some theorists argued that the wheel had never actually been forgotten. But to be useful, it needed someplace to roll — and Aster was a jungle. For several centuries, no wheel could compare in value with a good ax. Old memories of the wheel failed to take hold until after the Asterins had cleared enough ground to make its value apparent.) A thousand years after the wheel, the printing press came back into existence. (One of the major problems the Asterins had throughout their history to this point was what to do with all the dead lumber they created by making enough open space for their towns, fields, and roads. The reappearance of paper offered only a trivial solution until the printing press came along.) And a thousand years after the printing press, *Aster's Hope* was ready for her mission. Although they didn't know it, the people of Aster had beaten Earth's time for the same development by several thousand years.

Determination had a lot to do with it. People who came so far from Earth in order to procure the endurance of the human race didn't look kindly on anything that was less than what they wanted. But determination required an object: people had to know what they wanted. The alternative was a history

full of wars, since determined people who didn't know what they wanted tended to be unnecessarily aggressive.

That object — the dream that shaped Asterin life and civilization from the earliest generations; the inborn sense of common purpose and yearning that kept the wars short, caused people to share what they knew, and inspired progress — was provided by the legends of Earth and *Aster*.

Within two generations after the Crash, no one knew even vaguely where Earth was: the knowledge as well as the tools of astrogation had been lost. Two generations after that, it was no longer clear what Earth had been like. And after two more generations, the reality of space flight had begun to pass out of the collective Asterin imagination.

But the *ideas* endured.

Earth.

Aster.

'Nicians and 'puters.

Sleep.

On Aster, perhaps more than anywhere else in the galaxy, dreams provided the stuff of purpose. On Aster evolved a civilization driven by legends. Communally and individually, the images and passions that fired the mind during physical sleep became the goals that shaped the mind while it was awake.

To rediscover Earth.

And go back.

For centuries, of course, this looked like nonsense. If it had been a conscious choice rather than a planetary dream, it would have been discarded long ago. But since it was a dream, barely articulate except in poetry and painting and the secret silence of the heart, it held on until its people were ready for it.

Until, that is, the Asterins had reinvented radio telescopes and other receiving gear of sufficient sophistication to begin interpreting the signals they heard from the heavens.

Some of those signals sounded like they came from Earth.

This was a remarkable achievement. After all, the transmissions the Asterins were looking at hadn't been intended for Aster. (Indeed, they may not have been intended for anybody at all. It was far more likely that these signals were random emissions — the detritus, perhaps, of a world talking to itself and its planets.) They had been traveling for so long, had passed through so many different gravity wells on the way, and were so diffuse, that not even the wildest optimist in Aster's observatories could argue that these signals were messages. In fact, they were scarcely more than whispers in the ether, sighs, compared to which some of the more distant stars were shouting.

And yet, impelled by an almost unacknowledged dream, the Asterins had developed equipment that enabled them not only to hear those whispers, sort them out of the cosmic radio

cacophony, and make some surprisingly acute deductions about what (or who) caused them, but also to identify a possible source on the star charts.

The effect on Aster was galvanic. In simple terms, the communal dream came leaping suddenly out of the unconscious.

Earth. EARTH.

After that, it was only a matter of minutes before somebody said, "We ought to try to go there."

Which was exactly — a hundred years and an enormous expenditure of global resources, time, knowledge, and determination later — what *Aster's Hope* was doing.

Naturally enough — people being what they were — there were quite a few men and women on Aster who didn't believe in the mission. And there was also a large number who did believe who still had enough common sense or native pessimism to be cautious. As a result, there was a large planet-wide debate while *Aster's Hope* was being planned and built. Some people insisted on saying things like, "What if it isn't Earth at all? What if it's some alien planet where they don't know humanity from bat dung and don't care?"

Or: "At this distance, your figures aren't accurate within ten parsecs. How do you propose to compensate for that?"

Or: "What if the ship encounters someone else along the way? Finding intelligent life might be even more important than finding Earth. Or they might not like having our ship wander into their space. They might blow *Aster's Hope* to pieces — and then come looking for us."

Or, of course: "What if the ship gets all the way out there and doesn't find anything at all?"

Well, even the most avid proponent of the mission was able to admit that it would be unfortunate if *Aster's Hope* were to run a thousand light-years across the galaxy and then fail. So the planning and preparation spent on designing the ship and selecting and training the crew was prodigious. But the Asterins didn't actually start to build their ship until they found an answer to what they considered the most fundamental question about the mission.

On perhaps any other inhabited planet in the galaxy, that question would have been the question of speed. A thousand light-years was too far away. Some way of traveling faster than the speed of light was necessary. But the Asterins had a blind spot. They knew from legend that their ancestors had *slept* during a centuries-long, space-normal voyage; and they were simply unable to think realistically about traveling in any other way. They learned, as Earth had millennia ago, that c was a theoretical absolute limit: they believed it and turned their attention in other directions.

No, the question that troubled them was safety. They wanted to be

able to send out *Aster's Hope* certain that no passing hostile, meteor shower, or accident of diplomacy would be able to destroy her.

So she wasn't built until a poorly paid instructor at an obscure university suddenly managed to make sense out of a field of research that people had been laughing at for years:

C-vector.

For people who hadn't done their homework in theoretical mathematics or abstract physics, "c-vector" was defined as "at right angles to the speed of light." Which made no sense to anyone — but that didn't stop the Asterins from having fun with it. Before long, they discovered that they could build a generator to project a c-vector field.

If that field were projected around an object, it formed an impenetrable shield — a screen against which bullets and laser cannon and hydrogen torpedoes had no effect. (Any projectile or force that hit the shield bounced away "at right angles to the speed of light" and ceased to exist in material space. When this was discovered, several scientists spent several years wondering if a c-vector field could somehow be used as a faster-than-light drive for a spaceship. But no one was able to figure out just what direction "at right angles to the speed of light" was.) This appeared to have an obvious use as a weapon — project a field at an object, watch the object disappear — until the researchers learned that the field couldn't be projected either at or around any object unless the object and the field generator were stationary in relation to each other. But fortunately, the c-vector field had an even more obvious application for the men and women who were planning *Aster's Hope.*

If the shop were equipped with c-vector shields, she would be safe from any disaster short of direct collision with a star. And if the ship were equipped with a c-vector self-destruct, Aster would be safe from any disaster that might happen to — or be caused by — the crew of *Aster's Hope.*

Construction on the ship commenced almost immediately.

And eventually it was finished. The linguists and biologists and physicists were trained. The meditechs and librarians were equipped. The diplomats were instructed. Each of the 'nician and 'puter teams knew how to take *Aster's Hope* down to her microchips and rebuild (not to mention repro) her from spare parts.

Leaving orbit, setting course, building up speed, the ship arced past Philomel and Periwinkle on her way into the galactic void of the future. For the Asterins, it was as if legends had come back to life — as if a dream crouching in the human psyche since before the Crash had stood up and become real.

But six months later, roughly 0.4 light-years from Aster, Temple and Gracias weren't thinking about legends. They didn't see themselves as

protectors of a dream. When the emergency brapper went off, they did what any dedicated, well-trained, and quick-thinking Service personnel would have done: they panicked.

But while they panicked, they ran naked as children in the direction of the nearest auxcompcom.

In crude terms, the difference between 'nicians and 'puters was the difference between hardware and software — although there was quite a bit of overlap, of course. Temple made equipment work; Gracias told it what to do. It would've taken her hours to figure out how to do what he'd done to the door sensors. But when they heard the brapper and rolled off the pallet with her ahead of him and headed out of the capsule chamber, and the door didn't open, he was the one who froze.

"Damn," he muttered. "That repro won't cancel for another twenty minutes."

He looked like he was thinking something abusive about himself, so she snapped at him, "Hold it open for me, idiot."

He thudded a palm against his forehead. "Right."

Practically jumping into range of the sensor, he got the door open; and she passed him on his way out into the corridor. But she had to wait for him again at the auxcompcom door. "Come on. Come *on*," she fretted. "Whatever that brapper means, it isn't good."

"I know." Leftover sweat made his face slick, gave him a look of too much fear. Grimly, he pushed through the sensor field into the auxcompcom room and headed for his chair at the main com console.

Temple followed, jumped into her seat in front of her hardware controls. But for a few seconds neither of them looked at their buttons and readouts. They were fixed on the main screen above the consoles.

The ship's automatic scanners were showing a blip against the deep background of the stars. Even at this distance, Temple and Gracias didn't need the comp to tell them the dot of light on the phosphors of the screen was moving. They could see it by watching the stars recede as the scanners focused in on the blip.

It was coming toward them.

It was coming fast.

"An asteroid?" Temple asked, mostly to hear somebody say something. The comp was supposed to put *Aster's Hope* on emergency alert whenever it sensed a danger of collision with any object large enough to be significant.

"Oh, sure." Gracias poked his blunt fingers around his board, punching readouts up onto the other auxcompcom screens. Numbers and schematics flashed. "If asteroids change course."

"Change—?"

"Just did an adjustment," he confirmed. "Coming right at us. Also" — pointed at a screen to her left — "decelerating."

She stared at the screen, watched the numbers jump. Numbers were his department; he was faster at them than she was. But she knew what words meant. "Then it's a ship."

Gracias acted like he hadn't heard her. He was watching the screens as if he were close to apoplexy.

"That doesn't make sense," she went on. "If there are ships this close to Aster, why haven't we heard from them? We should've picked up their transmissions. They should've heard us. God knows we've been broadcasting enough noise for the past couple of centuries. Are we hailing it?"

"We're hailing," he said. "No answer." He paused for a second, then announced: "Estimated about three times our size." He sounded stunned. Carefully, he said, "The comp estimated it's decelerating from above the speed of light."

She couldn't help herself. "That's impossible," she snapped. "Your eyes are tricking you. Check it again."

He hit some more buttons, and the numbers on the screen twisted themselves into an extrapolation graph. Whatever it was, the oncoming ship was still moving faster than *Aster's Hope* — and it was still decelerating.

For a second she put her hands over her face, squeezed the heels of her palms against her temples. Her pulse felt like she was going into adrenaline overload. But this was what she'd been trained for. Abruptly, she dropped her arms and looked at the screens again. The blip was still coming, but the graph hadn't changed.

From above the speed of light. Even though the best Asterin scientists had always said that was impossible.

Oh, well, she muttered to herself. One more law of nature down the tubes. Easy come, easy go.

"Why don't they contact us?" she asked. "If we're aware of them, they must know we're here."

"Don't need to," Gracias replied through his concentration. "Been scanning us since they hit space-normal speed. The comp reports scanner probes everywhere. Strong enough to take your blood pressure." Then he stiffened, sat up straighter, spat a curse. "Probes are trying to break into the comp."

Temple gripped the arms of her seat. This was his department: she was helpless. "Can they do it? Can you stop them?"

"Encryption's holding them out." He studied his readouts, flicked his eyes past the screens. "Won't last. Take com."

Without waiting for an answer, he keyed his console to hers and got out of his seat. Quickly, he went to the other main console in the room, the comp repro board.

Feeling clumsy now as she never did when she was working with tools or hardware, she accepted com and began trying to monitor the readouts. But the numbers swam, and the prompts didn't seem to make sense.

Operating in emergency mode, the comp kept asking her to ask it questions; but she couldn't think of any for it. Instead, she asked Gracias, "What're you doing?"

His hands stabbed up and down the console. He was still sweating. "Changing the encryption," he said. "Whole series of changes. Putting them on a loop." When he was done, he took a minute to double-check his repro. Then he gave a grunt of satisfaction and came back to his com seat. While he keyed his controls away from Temple, he said, "This way, the comp can't be broken by knowing the present code. Have to know what code's coming up next. That loop changes often enough to keep us safe for a while."

She permitted herself a sigh of relief — and a soft snarl of anger at the oncoming ship. She didn't like feeling helpless. "If those bastards can't break the comp, do you think they'll try to contact us?"

He shrugged, glanced at his board. "Channels are open. They talk, we'll hear." For a second he chewed his lower lip. Then he leaned back in his seat and swung around to face her. His eyes were dark with fear.

"Don't like this," he said distinctly. "Don't like it at all. A faster-than-light ship coming straight for us. Straight for Aster. And they don't talk. Instead, they try to break the comp."

She knew his fear. She was afraid herself. But when he looked like he needed her, she put her own feelings aside. "Would you say," she said, drawling so she would sound sardonic and calm, "that we're being approached by somebody hostile?"

He nodded dumbly.

"Well, we're safe enough. Maybe the speed of light isn't unbreakable, but a c-vector shield is. So what we have to worry about is Aster. If that ship gets past us, we'll never catch up with it. How far away is it now?"

Gracias turned back to his console, called up some numbers. "Five minutes." His face didn't show it, but she could hear in his voice that he was grateful for her show of steadiness.

"I don't think we should wait to see what happens," she said. "We should send a message home now."

"Right." He went to work immediately, composing data on the screens, calling up the scant history of *Aster's Hope*'s contact with the approaching ship. "Continuous broadcast," he murmured as he piped information to the transmitters. "Constant update. Let Aster know everything we can."

Temple nodded her approval, then gaped in astonishment as the screens broke up into electronic garbage. A sound like frying circuitry spat from all the speakers at once — from the hailing channels as well as from intraship. She almost let out a shout of surprise; but training and recognition bit it back. She knew what that was.

"Jammer," Gracias said. "We're being jammed."

"From this distance?" she demanded. "From *this distance?* That kind of signal should take" — she checked her readout — "three and some fraction minutes to get here. How do they do that?"

He didn't reply for a few seconds; he was busy restoring order to the screens. Then he said, "They've got faster-than-light drive. Scanners make ours look like toys. Why not better radio?"

"Or maybe," she put in harshly, "they started broadcasting their jammer as soon as they picked us up." In spite of her determination to be calm, she was breathing hard, sucking uncertainty and anger through her teeth. "Can you break through?"

He tried, then shook his head. "Too thick."

"Damn! Gracias, what're we going to do? If we can't warn Aster, then it's up to us. If that ship is hostile, we've got to fight it somehow."

"Not built for it," he commented. "*Aster's Hope.* About as maneuverable as a rock."

She knew. Everything about the ship had been planned with defense rather than offense in mind. She was intended, first, to survive: second, not to prematurely give anything away about her homeworld. In fact as well as in appearance, she wasn't meant as a weapon of war. And one reason for this was that the mission planners had never once considered the idea of encountering an alien (never mind hostile) ship this close to home.

She found herself wishing for different armament, more speed, and a whole lot less mass. But that couldn't be helped now. "We need to get their attention somehow," she said. "Make them cope with us before they go on." An idea struck her. "What've the scanners got on them?"

"Still not much. Size. Velocity." Then, as if by intuition, he seemed to know what she had in mind. "Shields, of course. Look like ordinary force-disruption fields."

She almost smiled. "You're kidding. No c-vector?"

"Nope."

"Then maybe—" She thought furiously. "Maybe there's something we can do. If we can slow them down, maybe do them some damage — and they can't hurt us at all — maybe they won't go on to Aster.

"Gracias, are we on a collision course with that thing?"

He glanced at her. "Not quite. Going to miss by a kilometer."

As if she were in command of *Aster's Hope,* she said, "Put us in the way."

A grin flashed through his concentration. "Yes, sir, Temple, ma'am, sir. Good idea."

At once, he started keying instructions into his com board.

While he set up the comp to adjust *Aster's Hope*'s course — and then to adjust it continuously to keep the ship as squarely as possible in the oncoming

vessel's path — Temple secured herself in her momentum restraints. Less than three minutes, she thought. Three minutes to impact. For a moment, she thought Gracias was moving too slowly. But before she could say anything, he took his hands off the board and started strapping his own restraints. "Twenty seconds," he said.

She braced herself. "Are we going to feel it?"

"Inertial shift? Of course."

"No, idiot. Are we going to feel the impact?"

He shrugged. "If we hit. Nobody's ever hit a c-vector shield that hard with something that big."

Then Temple's stomach turned on its side, and the whole auxcompcon felt like it was starting into a spin.

The course adjustment was over almost immediately: at the speeds *Aster's Hope* and the alien were traveling, one kilometer was a subtle shift.

Less than two and a half minutes. If we hit. She couldn't sit there and wait for it in silence. "Are the scanners doing any better? We ought to be able to count their teeth from this range."

"Checking," he said. With a few buttons, he called a new display up onto the main screen—

— and stared at it without saying anything. His mouth hung open: his whole face was blank with astonishment.

"Gracias?" She looked at the screen for herself. With a mental effort, she tightened down the screws on her brain, forced herself to see the pattern in the numbers. Then she lost control of her voice: it went up like a yell. "Gracias?"

"Don't believe it," he murmured. "No. Don't believe it."

According to the scanners, the oncoming ship was crammed to the walls with computers and weaponry, equipment of every size and shape, mechanical and electrical energy of all kinds — and not one single living organism.

"There's nothing—" She tried to say it, but at first she couldn't. Her throat shut down, and she couldn't unlock it. She had to force a swallow past the rigid muscles. "There's nothing alive in that ship."

Abruptly, *Aster's Hope* went into a course shift that felt like it was going to pull her heart out of her chest. The alien was taking evasive action, and *Aster's Hope* was compensating.

One minute.

"That's crazy." She was almost shouting. "It comes in faster than light, and starts decelerating right at us, and jams our transmissions, and shifts course to try to keep us from running into it — and there's nobody *alive* on board? Whom do we talk to if we want to surrender?"

"Take it easy," Gracias said. "One thing at a time. Artificial intelligence is feasible. Ship thinks for itself. Or on automatic. Exploration probe might—"

Another course shift cut him off. A violent inertial kick — too violent. Her

head jerked to the left. Alarms went off like klaxons. *Aster's Hope* was trying to bring herself back toward collision with the other ship, trying—

The screens flashed loud warnings, danger signs as familiar to her as her name. Three of the ship's thrusters were overheating critically. One was tearing itself to pieces under the shift stress. *Aster's Hope* wasn't made for this.

She was the ship's 'nician: she couldn't let *Aster's Hope* be damaged. "Break off!" she shouted through the squall of the alarms. "We can't do it!"

Gracias slapped a hand at his board, canceled the collision course.

G-stress receded. Lights on Temple's board told her about thrusters damaged, doors jammed because they'd shifted on their mounts, a locker in the meditech section sprung, a handful of cryogenic capsules gone on backup. But the alarms were cut off almost instantly.

For a second the collision warnings went into a howl. Then they stopped. The sudden silence felt louder than the alarms.

Gracias punched visual up onto the screens. He got a picture in time to see the other ship go by in a blur of metal too fast for the eye to track. From a range the scanners measured in tens of meters, the alien looked the size of a fortress — squat, squarish, enormous.

As it passed, it jabbed a bright red shaft of force at *Aster's Hope* from point-blank range.

All the screens in the auxcompcom went dark.

"God!" Gracias gasped. "Scanners burned out?"

That was Temple's province. She was still reeling from the shock, the knowledge that *Aster's Hope* had been fired upon; but her hands had been trained until they had a life of their own, and they knew what to do. Hardly more than a heartbeat after she understood what Gracias said, she sent in a diagnostic on the scanner circuits. The answer trailed across the screen in front of her.

"No damage," she reported.

"Then what?" He sounded flustered, groping for comprehension.

"Did you get any scan on that beam?" she returned. "Enough to analyze?" Then she explained: "Right angles to the speed of light isn't the same direction for every force. Maybe the c-vector sent this one off into some kind of wraparound field."

That was what he needed. "Right." His hands went to work on his board again.

Almost immediately, he had an answer. "Ion beam. Would've reduced us to subatomic particles without the shield. But only visual's lost. Scanners still functioning. Have visual back in a second."

"Good." She double-checked her own readouts, made sure that *Aster's Hope*'s attempts to maneuver with the alien hadn't done any urgent harm. At the same time, she reassured herself

that the force of the ion beam hadn't been felt inside the shield. Then she pulled her attention back to the screens and Gracias.

"What's our friend doing now?"

He grunted, nodded up at the main screen. The comp was plotting another graph, showing the other ship's course in relation to *Aster's Hope*.

She blinked at it. That was impossible. Impossible for a ship that size moving that fast to turn that hard.

But of course, she thought with an odd sensation of craziness, there isn't anything living aboard to feel the G-stress.

"Well." She swallowed at the way her voice shook. "At least we got their attention."

Gracias tried to laugh, but it came out like a snarl. "Good for us. Now what?"

"We could try to run," she offered. "Put as much distance as possible between us and home."

He shook his head. "Won't work. They're faster."

"Besides which," she growled, "we've left a particle trail even *we* could follow all the way back to Aster. That and the incessant radio gabble — If that mechanical behemoth wants to find our homeworld, we might as well transmit a map."

He pulled back from his board, swung his seat to face her again. His expression troubled her. His eyes seemed dull, almost glazed, as if under pressure his intelligence were slowly losing its edge. "Got a choice?" he asked.

The thought that he might fail *Aster's Hope* made panic beat in her forehead; but she forced it down. "Sure," she snapped, trying to send him a spark of her own anger. "We can fight."

His eyes didn't focus on her. "Got laser cannon," he said. "Hydrogen torpedoes. Ship like that" — he nodded toward the screen — "won't have shields we can hurt. How can we fight?"

"You said they're ordinary force-disruption fields. We can break through that. Any sustained pounding can break through. That's why they didn't build *Aster's Hope* until they could do better."

He still didn't quite look at her. Enunciating carefully, he said, "I don't believe that ship has shields we can hurt."

Temple pounded the edge of her console. "Damn it, Gracias! We've got to try! We can't just sit here until they get bored and decide to go do something terrible to our homeworld. If you aren't interested—" Abruptly, she leaned back in her seat, took a deep breath, and held it to steady herself. Then she said quietly, "Key com over to me. I'll do it myself."

For a minute longer, he remained the way he was, his gaze staring unfocused past her chin. Slowly, he nodded. Moving sluggishly, he turned back to his console.

But instead of keying com over to

Temple, he told the comp to begin decelerating *Aster's Hope*. Losing inertia so the ship could maneuver better.

Softly, she let a sigh of relief through her teeth.

While *Aster's Hope* braked, pulling her against her momentum restraints, and the unliving alien ship continued its impossible turn, she unlocked the weaponry controls on her console. A string of lights began to indicate the status of every piece of combative equipment Aster's Hope carried.

It wasn't supposed to be like this, Temple thought to herself. She'd never imagined it like this. When/if the Asterin mission encountered some unexpected form of life, another space-going vessel, a plantary intelligence, the whole situation should've been different. A hard-nosed distrust was to be expected: a fear of the unknown, a desire to protect the homeworld, communication problems, wise caution. But not unprovoked assault. Not an immediate pitched battle out in the middle of nowhere, with Aster itself at issue.

Not an alien ship full of nothing but machinery? Was that the crucial point?

All right: What purpose could a ship like that serve? Exploration probe? Then it wouldn't be hostile. A defense mechanism for a theoretically secure sector of space that *Aster's Hope* had somehow violated? But they were at least fifty light-years from the nearest neighbor to Aster's star; and it was difficult to imagine an intelligence so paranoid that its conception of "territorial space" reached out this far. Some kind of automated weapon? But Aster didn't have any enemies.

None of it made any sense. And as Temple tried to sort it out, her confusion grew worse. It started her sliding into panic.

Fortunately, Gracias chose that moment to ask gruffly, "Ready? It's hauling up on us fast. Be in range in a minute."

She made an effort to control her breathing, shake the knots of panic out of her mind. "Plot an evasive course," she said, "and key it to my board." Her weapons program had to know where *Aster's Hope* was going in order to use its armament effectively.

"Why?" he asked. "Don't need evasion. Shield'll protect us."

"To keep them guessing." Her tension was plain in her voice. "And to show them we can hit them on the run. Do it."

She thought he was moving too slowly. But faster than she could've done it, he had a plot up on the main screen, showing the alien's incoming course and the shifts *Aster's Hope* was about to make.

Temple tried to wipe the sweat from her palms on her bare legs; but it didn't do much good. Snarling at the way her hands felt, she poised them over the weapons com.

Gracias's plot stayed on the main screen; but the display in front of her gave Temple visual again, and she saw

the alien ship approaching like a bright metal projectile the galaxy had flung to knock *Aster's Hope* out of the heavens. Suddenly frantic, as if she believed the other ship were actually going to crush her, she started firing.

Beams of light shot at the alien from every laser port the comp could bring to bear.

Though the ship was huge, the beams focused on a single section: Temple was trying to maximize their impact. When they hit the force-disruption field, light suddenly blared all across the spectrum, sending up a rainbow of coruscation.

"Negative," Gracias reported as *Aster's Hope* wrenched into her first evasion shift. "No effect."

Her weight rammed against the restraints, the skin of her cheeks pulling, Temple punched the weapons com into continuous fire, then concentrated on holding up her head so that she could watch the visual.

As her lasers turned the alien ship's shields into a fireworks display, another bright red shaft of force came as straight as a spear at *Aster's Hope*.

Again, the screen lost visual.

But this time Gracias was ready. He got scanner plots onto the screen while visual was out of use. Temple could see her laser fire like an equation on a graph connecting *Aster's Hope* and the unliving ship. Every few seconds, a line came back the other way—an ion beam as accurate as if *Aster's Hope* were stationary. "Any effect yet?" she gasped at Gracias as another evasion shift kicked her to the other side of her seat. "We're hitting them hard. It's got to have an effect."

"Negative," he repeated. "That shield disperses force almost as fast as it comes in. Doesn't weaken."

Then the attacker went past. In seconds it would be out of reach of Temple's laser cannon.

"Cancel evasion." she snapped, keying her com out of continuous fire. "Go after them. As fast as we can. Give me a chance to aim a torpedo."

"Right," he responded. And a second later, G-stress slammed at her as all the ship's thrusters went on full power, roaring for acceleration.

Aster's Hope steadied on the alien's course and did her best to match its speed.

"Now," Temple muttered. "Now. Before they start to turn." Her hands quick on the weapons board, she primed a whole barrage of hydrogen torpedoes. Then she pulled in course coordinates from the comp. "Go." With the flat of her hand on all the launch buttons at once, she fired.

The comp automatically blinked the c-vector shield to let the torpedoes out. Fired from a source moving as fast as *Aster's Hope* was, they attained 0.95c almost immediately and went after the other ship.

Gracias didn't wait for Temple's instructions. He reversed thrust, decelerating *Aster's Hope* again to stay as

far as possible from the blast when the torpedoes hit.

If they hit. The scanner plot on the main screen showed that the alien was starting to turn.

"Come on," Temple breathed. Unconsciously, she pounded her fists on the arms of her seat. "Come on. Hit that bastard. Hit."

"Impact," Gracias said as all the blips on the scanner came together.

At that instant, visual cleared. They saw a hot white ball explode like a balloon of energy rupturing in all directions at once.

Then both visual and scan went haywire for a few long seconds. The detonation of that many hydrogen torpedoes at once filled all the space around *Aster's Hope* with chaos: energy emissions on every frequency, supercharged particles phasing in and out of existence as they scanned away from the point of explosion.

"Hit him," Gracias murmured.

Temple gripped the arms of her seat, stared at the garbage on the screens. "What do you think? Can they stand up to that?"

He didn't shrug. He looked like he didn't have that much energy left.

"Can't you clear the screens? We've got to *see*."

"The comp's doing it." Then, a second later: "Here it comes."

The screens wiped themselves clear, and a new scanner plot mapped the phosphors in front of him. It showed the alien turning hard, coming back toward *Aster's Hope*.

The readout was negative. No damage.

"Oh, God," she sighed. "I don't believe it." All the strength seemed to run out of her body. She sagged against her restraints. "Now what do we do?"

He went on staring at the screens for a long moment while the attacking ship completed its turn. Then he said, "Don't know. Try for collision again?"

When she didn't say anything, he gave the problem to the comp, told it to wait until the last possible instant — considering *Aster's Hope*'s poor maneuverability — and then thrust the ship into the alien's path. After that, he keyed his board onto automatic and leaned back in his restraints. To Temple's surprise, he yawned hugely.

"Need sleep," he mumbled thickly. "Be glad when this shift's over."

Surprise and fear made her acid. "You're not thinking very clearly, Gracias." She needed him, but he seemed to be getting farther and farther away. "Do you think the mission can continue after this? What do you think the chances are that that ship's going to give up and let us go on our way? My God, there isn't even anybody *alive* over there! The whole thing is just a machine. It can stay here and pound at us for centuries, and it won't even get bored. Or it can calculate the odds on Aster's building a c-vector shield big enough to cover the whole planet — and it can just forget about us, leave us here, and go attack our

homeworld, because there won't be anything we can do to stop it and Aster is *unprotected.* We don't even know what it *wants.* We—"

She might have gone on, but the comp chose that moment to heave *Aster's Hope* in front of the alien. Every thruster screaming, the ship pulled her mass into a terrible acceleration, fighting for a collision her attacker couldn't avoid. Temple felt like she was being cut to pieces by the straps holding her in her seat. She tried to cry out, but she couldn't get any air into her lungs.

Her damage readout and lights began to put on a show.

But the alien ship skipped aside and went past without being touched.

For a second, *Aster's Hope* pulled around, trying to follow her opponent. Then Gracias forced himself forward and canceled the comp's collision instructions. Instantly, the G-stress eased. The ship settled onto a new heading chosen by her inertia, the alien already turning again to come after her.

"Damn," he said softly. "Damn it."

Temple let herself rest against her restraints. We can't—, she thought dully. Can't even run into that thing. It can't hurt us. But we can't hurt it. *Aster's Hope* wasn't built to be a warship. She wasn't supposed to protect her homeworld by fighting: she was supposed to protect it by being diplomatic and cunning and distant. If the worse came to the very worst, she was supposed to protect Aster by not coming back. But this was a mission of peace, the mission of Aster's dream: the ship was never intended to fight for anything except her own survival.

"For some reason," Temple murmured into the silence of the auxcompcom, "I don't think this is what I had in mind when I joined the Service."

Gracias started to say something. The sound of frying circuitry from the speakers cut him off. It got Temple's attention like a splash of hot oil.

This time it wasn't the jammer. She saw that in the readouts jumping across the screens. It was another scanner probe, like the one that had tried to break into the comp earlier. But now it was tearing into the ship's unprotected communication hardware — the intraship speakers.

After the initial burst of static, the sounds began to change. Frying became whistles and grunts, growls and moans. For a minute she had the impression she was listening to some inconceivable alien language. But before she could call up the comp's translation programs — or ask Gracias to do it — the interference on the speakers modulated until it became a voice and words.

A voice from every speaker in the auxcompcom at once.

Words Temple and Gracias understood.

The voice sounded like a poorly calibrated voder, metallic and insensitive. But the words were distinct.

"Surrender, badlife. You will be destroyed."

The scanner probe had turned up the gain on all the speakers. The voice was so loud it seemed to rattle the aux-compcom door on its mounts.

Involuntarily, Temple gasped, "Good God. What in hell is that?"

Gracias replied unnecessarily, "The other ship. Talking to us." He sounded dull, defeated, almost uninterested.

"I *know* that," she snapped. "For God's sake, *wake up!*" Abruptly, she slapped a hand at her board, opened a radio channel. "Who are you?" she demanded into her mike. "What do you want? We're no threat to you. Our mission is peaceful. Why are you attacking us?"

The scanner plot on the main screen showed that the alien ship had already completed its turn and caught up with *Aster's Hope.* Now it was matching her course and speed, shadowing her at a distance of less than half a kilometer.

"Surrender," the speakers blared again. "You are badlife. You will be destroyed. You must surrender."

Frantic with fear and urgency, and not able to control it, Temple slapped off her mike and swung her seat to rage at Gracias, "Can't you turn that *down?* It splitting my eardrums!"

Slowly, as if he were half-asleep, he tapped a few buttons on his console. Blinking at the readouts, he murmured, "Hardware problem. Scanner probe's stronger than the comp's line voltage. Have to reduce gain manually." Then he widened his eyes at something that managed to surprise him even in his stunned state. "Only speakers affected are in here. This room. Bastard knows exactly where we are. And every circuit around us."

That didn't make sense. It made so little sense that it caught her attention, focused her in spite of her panic. "Wait a minute," she said. "They're only using *these* speakers? The ones in this room? How do they know we're in here? Gracias, there are 392 people aboard. How can they possibly know you and I are the only ones awake?"

"You must surrender," the speakers squalled again. "You cannot flee. You have no speed. You cannot fight. Your weapons are puny. When your shields are broken, you will be helpless. Your secrets will be lost. Only surrender can save your lives."

She keyed her mike again. "No. You're making a mistake. We're no threat to you. Who are you? What do you want?"

"Death," the speakers replied. "Death for all life. Death for all worlds. You must surrender."

Gracias closed his eyes. Without looking at what he was doing, he moved his hands on the board, got visual back up on the main screen. The screen showed the alien ship sailing like a skyborne fort an exact distance from *Aster's Hope.* It held its position so precisely that it looked motionless. It seemed so close Temple thought she

could have hit it with a rock.

"Maybe," Gracias sighed, "they don't know we're the only ones awake."

She didn't understand what he was thinking, but she caught at it as if it were a lifeline. "What do you mean?"

He didn't open his eyes. "Cryogenically frozen," he said. "Vital signs so low the monitors can hardly read them. Capsules are just equipment. And the comp's encrypted. Maybe that scanner probe thinks we're the only life-forms here."

She caught her breath. "If that's true—" Ideas reeled through her head. "They probably want us to surrender because they can't figure out our shields. And because they want to know what we're doing, just the two of us in this big ship. It might be suicide for them to go on to Aster without knowing the answers to questions like that. And while they're trying to find out how to break down our shields, they'll probably stay right there.

"Gracias," she said, her heart pounding with unreasonable hope, "how long would it take you to repro the comp to project a c-vector field at that ship? We're stationary in relation to each other. We can use our field generator as a weapon."

That got his eyes open. When he rolled his head to the side to face her, he looked sick. "How long will it take you," he asked, "to rebuild the generator for that kind of projection? And what will we use for shields while you're working?"

He was right: she knew it as soon as he said it. But there had to something they could do, *had* to be. They couldn't just sail across the galactic void for the next few thousand years while their homeworld was destroyed behind them.

There had to be *something* they could do.

The speakers started trumpeting again. "Badlife, you have been warned. The destruction of your ship will now begin. You must surrender to save your lives."

Badlife, Temple wondered crazily to herself. What does that mean, *badlife?* Is the ship some kind of automatic weapon gone berserk, shooting around the galaxy exterminating what it calls badlife?

How is it going to destroy *Aster's Hope?*

She didn't have to wait long to find out. Almost immediately, she felt a heavy metallic thunk vibrate through the seals that held her seat to the floor. A fraction of an instant later, a small flash of light from somewhere amidships on the attacking vessel showed that a projectile weapon had been fired.

Then alarms began to howl, and the damage readouts on Temple's board began to spit intimations of disaster.

Training took over through her panic. Her hands danced on the console, gleaning data. "We've been hit." Through the shield. "Some kind of

projectile." *Through the c-vector shield.* "It's breached the hull." All three layers of the ship's metal skin. "I don't know what it was, but it's punched a hole all the way to the outer-shell wall."

Gracias interrupted her. "How big's the hole?"

"About a meter square." She went back to the discipline of her report. "The comp is closing pressure doors, isolating the breach. Damage is minor — we've lost one heat exchanger for the climate control. But if they do that again, they might hit something more vital." Trusting the c-vector shields, *Aster's Hope*'s builders hadn't tried to make her particularly hard to damage in other ways.

The alien ship did it again. Another tearing thud as the projectile hit. Another small flash of light from the attacker. More alarms. Temple's board began to look like it was monitoring a madhouse.

"The same place," she said, fighting a rising desire to scream. "It's pierced outer-shell. Atmosphere loss is trivial. The comp is closing more pressure doors." She tapped commands into the console. "Extrapolating the path of those shots, I'm closing all the doors along the way." Then she called up a damage estimate on the destructive force of the projectiles. "Two more like that will breach one of the mid-shell cryogenic chambers. We're going to start losing people."

And if the projectiles went on pounding the same place, deeper and deeper into the ship, they would eventually reach the c-vector generator.

It was true: *Aster's Hope* was going to be destroyed.

"Gracias, what is it? This is supposed to be impossible. How are they doing it to us?"

"Happening too fast to scan." In spite of his torpor, he already had all the answers he needed up on his screen. "Faster-than-light projectile. Flash shows after impact. Vaporize us if we didn't have the shields. C-vector brings it down to space-normal speed. But then it's inside the field. Ship wasn't built for this."

A faster— For a moment her brain refused to understand the words. A faster-than-light projectile. And when it hit the shield, just enough of its energy went off at right angles to the speed of light to slow it down. Not enough to stop it.

As if in mockery, the speakers began to blast again. "Your ship is desired intact. Surrender. Your lives will be spared. You will be granted opportunity to serve as goodlife."

So exasperated she hardly knew what she was doing, Temple slapped open a radio channel. "Shut up!" she shouted across the black space between *Aster's Hope* and the alien. "Stop shooting! Give us a chance to think! How can we surrender if you don't give us a chance to think?"

Gulping air, she looked at Gracias. She felt wild and didn't know what to

do about it. His eyes were dull, low-lidded: he might've been going to sleep. Sick with fear, she panted at him, "Do something! You're the ship's 'puter. You're supposed to take care of her. You're supposed to have ideas. *They can't do this to my ship!*"

Slowly — too slowly — he turned toward her. His neck hardly seemed strong enough to hold his head up. "Do what? Shield's all we've got. Now it isn't any good. That" — he grimaced — "that thing — has everything. Nothing we can do."

Furiously, she ripped off her restraints, heaved out of her seat so she could go to him and shake him. "There has to be something we can do!" she shouted into his face. "We're human! That thing's nothing but a pile of microchips and demented programming. We're more than it is! Don't surrender! *Think!*"

For a moment he stared at her. Then he let out an empty laugh. "What good's being human? Doesn't help. Only intelligence and power count. Those machines have intelligence. Maybe more than we do. More advanced than we are. And a lot more powerful." Dully, he repeated, "Nothing we can do."

In response, Temple wanted to rage at him: We can refuse to give up! We can keep fighting! We're not beaten as long as we're stubborn enough to keep fighting! But as soon as she thought that, she knew she was wrong. There was nothing in life as stubborn as a machine doing what it was told.

"Intelligence and power aren't all that count," she protested, trying urgently to find what she wanted, something she could believe in, something that would pull Gracias out of his defeat. "What about emotion? That ship can't care about anything. What about love?"

When she said that, his expression crumpled. Roughly, he put his hands over his face. His shoulders knotted as he struggled with himself.

"Well, then," she went on, too desperate to pull back, "we can use the self-destruct. Kill *Aster's Hope*" — the bare idea choked her, but she forced it out — "to keep them from finding out how the shield generator works. Altruism. That's something they don't have."

Abruptly, Gracias wrenched his hands down from his face, pulled them into fists, pounded them on the arms of his seat. "Stop it," he whispered. "*Stop* it. Machines are altruistic. Don't care about themselves at all. Only thing they can't do is feel bad when what they want is taken away. Any second now, they're going to start firing again. We're dead, and there's nothing we can do about it, *nothing*. Stop breaking my heart."

His anger and rejection should have hurt her. But he was awake and alive, and his eyes were on fire in the way she loved. Suddenly, she wasn't alone: he'd come back from his dull horror. "Gracias," she said softly. "Gracias."

Possibilities were moving in back of her brain, ideas full of terror and hope, ideas she was afraid to say out loud. "We can wake everybody up. See if anybody else can think of anything. Put it to a vote. Let the mission make its own decision.

"Or we can—"

What she was thinking scared her out of her mind, but she told him what it was, anyway. Then she let him yell at her until he couldn't think of any more arguments against it.

After all, they had to save Aster.

Her part of the preparations was simple enough. She left him in the aux-compcom and took the nearest shaft down to the inner-shell. First she visited a locker to get her tools and a magnetic sled. Then she went to the central command center.

In the cencom, she keyed a radio channel. Hoping the alien was listening, she said, "I'm Temple. My partner is crazy — he wants to fight. I want to surrender. I'll have to kill him. It won't be easy. Give me some time. I'm going to disable the shields."

She took a deep breath, forced herself to sigh. Could a mechanical alien understand a sigh? "Unfortunately, when the shields go down, it's going to engage an automatic self-destruct. That I can't disable. So don't try to board the ship. You'll get blown to pieces. I'll come out to you.

"I want to be goodlife, not badlife. To prove my good faith, I'm going to bring with me a portable generator for the c-vector field we use as shields. You can study it, learn how it works. Frankly, you need it." The alien ship could probably hear the stress in her voice, so she made an extra effort to sound sarcastic. "You'd be dead by now if we weren't on a peace mission. We know how to break down your shields — we just don't have the firepower."

There. She clicked off the transmitter. Let them think about that for a while.

From the cencom, she opened one of the access hatches and took her tools and mag-sled down into the core of *Aster's Hope*, where most of the ship's vital equipment operated — the comp banks, the artificial gravity inducer, the primary life-support systems, the c-vector generator.

While she worked, she didn't talk to Gracias. She wanted to know how he was doing; but she already knew the intraship communication lines weren't secure from the alien's scanner probe.

In a relatively short time — she was *Aster's Hope*'s 'nician and knew what she was doing — she had the ship's self-destruct device detached from its comp links and loaded onto the mag-sled. That device (called "the black box" by the mission planners) was no more than half Temple's size, but it was a fully functional c-vector generator, capable from its own energy cells of sending the entire ship off at right

angles to the speed of light, even if the rest of *Aster's Hope* were inoperative. With the comp links disconnected, Gracias couldn't do anything to destroy the ship; but Temple made sure the self-destruct's radio trigger was armed and ready before she steered the mag-sled up out of the core.

This time when she left the cencom, she took a shaft up to the mid-shell chamber where she and Gracias had their cryogenic capsules. He wasn't there yet. While she waited for him, she went around the room and disconnected all the speakers. She hoped her movements might make her look from a distance like one furtive life-form preparing an ambush for another.

He was slow in coming. The delay made her fret. Was it possible that he had lapsed back into half-somnolent panic? Or had he changed his mind — decided she was crazy? He'd yelled at her as if she were asking him to help her commit suicide. What if he—?

The door whooshed open, and Gracias came into the chamber almost at a run. "Have to hurry," he panted. "Only got fifteen minutes before the shield drops."

His face looked dark and bruised and fierce, as if he'd spent the time she was away from him hitting himself with his fists. For a second, Temple caught a glimpse of just how terrible what she was asking him to do was.

Ignoring the need for haste, she went to him, put her arms around him, hugged him hard. "Gracias," she breathed, "it's going to work. Don't look at me like that."

He returned her embrace so roughly he made her gasp. But almost immediately he let her go. "Keep your suit radio open," he rasped while he pushed past her and moved to his capsule. "If you go off, the comp will take over. Blow you out of space." Harshly, he pulled himself over the edge into the bed of the capsule. "Two-stage code," he continued. "First say my name." His eyes burned blackly in their sockets, savage with pain and fear. "If that works, say 'Aster.' If it *doesn't* work, say 'Aster.' Whatever happens. Ship doesn't deserve to die in her sleep."

As if he were dismissing her, he reclined in the capsule and folded his arms over his chest.

But when she went to him to say good-bye, he reached out urgently and caught her wrist. "Why?" he asked softly. "Why are we doing it this way?"

Oh, Gracias. His desperation hurt her. "Because this is the only way we can persuade them not to blow up *Aster's Hope* — or come storming aboard — when we let down the shields."

His voice hissing between his clenched teeth, he asked, "Why can't I come with you?"

Tears she couldn't stop ran down her cheeks. "They'll be more likely to trust me if they think I've killed you. And somebody has to stay here. To decide what to do if this all goes wrong. These are the jobs we've been trained for."

For a long moment he faced her with his dark distress. Then he let go of her arm. "Comp'll wake me up when you give the first code."

She was supposed to be hurrying. She could hardly bear to leave him; but she forced herself to kiss him quickly, then step back and engage the lid of his capsule. Slowly, the lid closed down over him until it sealed. The gas that prepared his body for freezing filled the capsule. But he went on staring out at her, darkly, hotly, until the inside of the lid frosted opaque.

Ignoring the tears that streaked her face, she left him. The sled floating on its magnetic field ahead of her, she went to the shaft and rode up to outershell, as close as she could safely get to the point where the faster-than-light projectiles had breached *Aster's Hope*'s hull. From there she steered the mag-sled into the locker room beside the air lock that gave access to the nearest exterior port.

In the locker room she put on her suit. Because everything depended on it, she tested the suit's radio unit circuits four times. Then she engaged the suit's pressure seals and took the mag-sled into the air lock.

Monitored automatically by the comp, she cycled the air lock to match the null atmosphere/gravity in the port. After that, she didn't need the mag-sled anymore. With hardly a minute to spare, she nudged the black box out into the high metal cave of the port and keyed the controls to open the port doors.

The doors slid back, leaving her face to face with the naked emptiness of space.

At first she couldn't see the alien ship: everything outside the port was too dark. But *Aster's Hope* was still less than half a light-year from home; and when Temple's eyes adjusted to the void, she found that Aster's sun sent out enough illumination to show the attacking vessel against the background of the stars.

It appeared too big and fatal for her to hurt.

But after the way Gracias had looked at her in farewell, she couldn't bear to hesitate. This had to be done. As soon as the alarm went off in the port — and all over *Aster's Hope* — warning the ship that the shields were down, she cleared her throat, forced her taut voice into use.

"All right," she said into the radio. "I've done it. I've killed my partner. I've shut down the shields. I want you to keep your promise. Save my life. I'm coming out. If we're within a hundred kilometers of the ship when the automatic self-destruct goes, we'll go with it.

"I've got the portable field generator with me. I can show you how to use it. I can teach you how to make it. You've got to keep your promise."

She didn't wait for an answer: she didn't expect one. The only answer she'd received earlier was a cessation of the shooting. That was enough. All she had to do was get close to the alien ship.

Grimly, she tightened her grip on one handle of the black box and fired her suit's small thrusters to impel herself and her burden past the heavy doors out into the dark.

Automatically, the comp closed the doors after her, shutting her out.

For an instant her own smallness almost overwhelmed her. No Asterin had been where she was now: outside her ship half a light-year from home. All of her training had been in comfortable orbit around Aster, the planet acting as a balance to the immensity of space. And there had been light! Here there were only the gleams and glitters emitted by *Aster's Hope*'s cameras and scanners — and the barely discernible bulk of the alien, its squat lines only less dark than the black heavens.

But she knew that if she let herself think that way, she would go mad. Gritting her teeth, she focused her attention — and her thrusters — toward the enemy.

Now everything depended on whether the alien knew there were people alive aboard *Aster's Hope*. Whether the alien had been able to analyze or deduce all the implications of the c-vector shield. And whether she could get away.

The size of the other vessel made the distance appear less than it was; but after a while she was close enough to see a port opening in the side of the ship.

Then — so suddenly that she flinched and broke into a sweat — a voice came over her suit radio.

"You will enter the dock open before you. It is heavily shielded and invulnerable to explosion. You will remain in the dock with your device. If this is an attempt at treachery, you will be destroyed by your own weapon.

"If you are goodlife, you will be spared. You will remain with your device while you dismantle it for inspection. When its principles are understood, you will be permitted to answer other questions."

"Thanks a whole bunch," she muttered in response. But she didn't let herself slow down or shy away. Instead, she went straight toward the open port until the dock was yawning directly in front of her.

Then she put to the test the repro Gracias had done on the comp.

What she had to do was so risky, so unreasonably dangerous, that she did it almost without thinking about it, as if she'd been doing things like that all her life.

Aiming her thrusters right against the side of the black box, she fired them so that the box was kicked hard and fast into the mouth of the dock and her own momentum in that direction was stopped. There she waited until she saw the force field that shielded the dock drag the box to a stop, grip it motionless. Then she shouted into her radio as if the comp were deaf, "Gracias!"

On that code, *Aster's Hope* put out a tractor beam and snatched her away from the alien.

It was a small industrial tractor beam, the kind used first in the construction of *Aster's Hope*, then in the loading of cargo. It was far too small and finely focused to have any function as a weapon. But it was perfect for quickly moving an object the size of Temple in her suit across the distance between the two ships.

Timing was critical, but she made that decision also almost without thinking about it. As the beam rushed her toward *Aster's Hope*, she shouted into the radio, "Aster!" And on that code, her ship simultaneously raised its c-vector shields and triggered the black box. She was inside the shield for the last brief instants while the alien was still able to fire at her.

Later, she and Gracias saw that the end of their attacker had been singularly unspectacular. Still somewhat groggy from his imposed nap, he met her in the locker room to help her take off her suit; but when she demanded urgently, "What happened? Did it work?" he couldn't answer her because he hadn't checked: he'd come straight to the locker from his capsule when the comp had awakened him. So they ran together to the nearest auxcompcom to find out if they were safe.

They were. The alien ship was nowhere within scanner range. Wherever it had gone, it left no trace or trail.

So he replayed the visual and scanner records, and they saw what happened to a vessel when a c-vector field was projected onto it.

It simply winked out of existence.

After that, she felt like celebrating. In fact, there was a particular kind of celebration she had in mind. But when she let him know what she was thinking, he pushed her gently away. "In a few minutes," he said. "Got work to do."

"What work?" she protested. "We just saved the world — and they don't even know it. We deserve a vacation for the rest of the trip."

He nodded, but didn't move away from the comp console.

"What work?" she repeated.

"Course change," he said. He looked like he was trying not to grin. "Going back to Aster."

"What?" He surprised her so much that she shouted at him without meaning to. "You're aborting the mission? Just like that? What the hell do you think you're doing?"

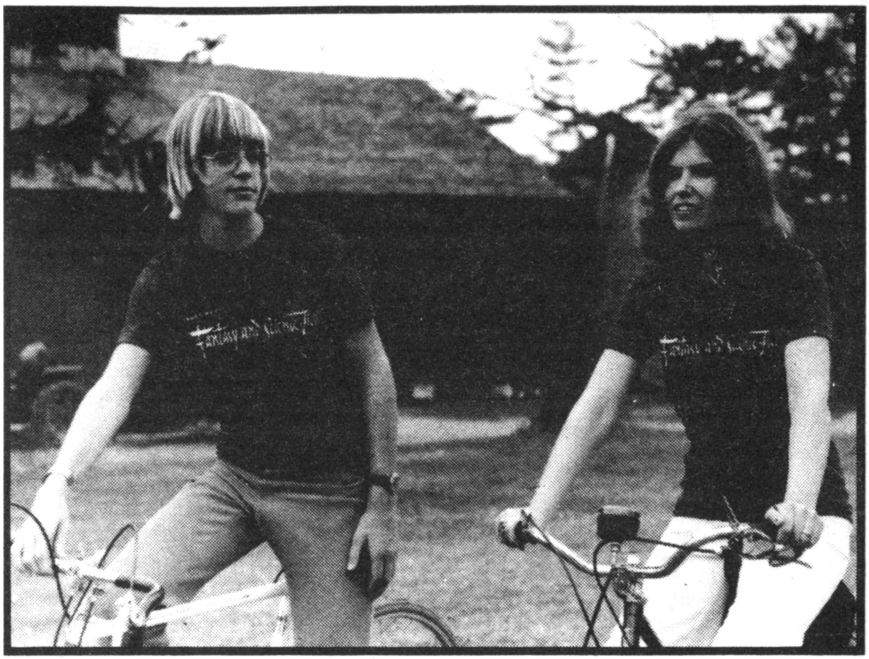
For a moment he did his best to scowl thunderously. Then the grin took over. "Now we know faster-than-light is possible," he said. "Just need more research. So why spend a thousand years sleeping across the galaxy. Why not go home, do the research — start again when we can do what that ship did."

He looked at her. "Makes sense?"

She was grinning. "Makes sense."

When he was done with the comp, he got even with her for spilling ice cream on him.

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F&SF Competition

REPORT ON COMPETITION 35

In the March issue we asked competitors to send in up to a dozen capsule reviews of any sf or fantasy title. We know sf readers are born critics, but perhaps you need a column rather than a few words; the response was only slightly better than average in terms of numbers, though the quality was excellent. The winners:

FIRST PRIZE

Disch, *The Puppies of Terra:* A playful novel with bite.

Niven, *The Integral Trees:* Derivative, wooden.

McIntyre, *The Entropy Effect:* Ran out of energy.

Dann, *Starhiker:* Pick this one up.

Ende, *The Neverending Story:* Seemed that way.

Ellison: *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream:* I have and yawned.

Heinlein, *Glory Road:* Plot holes; needs resurfacing.

Williamson, *Manseed:* Grows on you.

—*Robert Werner*
Albany, NY

SECOND PRIZE

Farmer, *To Your Scattered Bodies Go:* Hither, thither, and yawn.

Anthony, *The Magic of Xanth:* Knights of wild abandon.

Hubbard, *Battlefield Earth:* Buck Rogers in the 19th century.

Farmer, *The Lovers:* A lewd awakening.

Ballard, *The Burning World:* Smoke without fire.

—*Rick Duling*
Indianapois, IN

RUNNERS UP

Heinlein, *The Moon Is A Harsh Mistress:* Masterful.

Boyd, *The Last Starship from Earth:* Don't miss it.

Pohl, *Gateway:* Liberating.

Brin, *Startide Rising:* Has its highs and lows.

—*Bridget Mintz Register*
Dayton, TX

(From our March issue):

Denton, *The Music of the Spheres:* My money Bach, please!

Conner, *Five Mercies:* Take the fifth.

Westlake, *Hydra:* Over my head.

Kelly, *The F&SF Diet:* A loser.

Harness, *The Fall of Robin Arms:* Can winter be far behind?

Tritten, *Exit Laughing:* But exit.

—*James Gale*
Heddon Heights, NJ

Asimov, *Eight Stories from The Rest of the Robots:* Cut and droid.

Brunner, *The Sheep Look Up:* Baa, humbug!

Levin, *Rosemary's Baby:* Myth conceived.

McCaffrey, *Dragonflight:* Pernographic.

Adams, *Watership Down:* Hare-raising.

—*Jean MacKay Jackson*
Broken Arrow, OK

Zamatian, *We:* Oui, oui!

Durrell, *Tunc:* Tunc — but no tuncs.

Moorcock, *A Cure for Cancer:* A cure rather, for insomnia.

Meredith, *The Shaving of Shagpat:* Hair-razing!

—*Timothy Wirkkala*
Rosburg, WA

COMPETITION 36 (suggested by Philip Michael Cohen)

Send us up to a dozen proverbs and cliches, given a SF/futuristic twist, i.e.:
Idle hands are the Devil's waldoes.
Cloned to raise hell.
Let them eat Soylent Green.

Rules: Send entries to Competition Editor, F&SF, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Entries must be received by August 15. Judges are the editors of F&SF; their decision is final. All entries become the property of F&SF; none can be returned.

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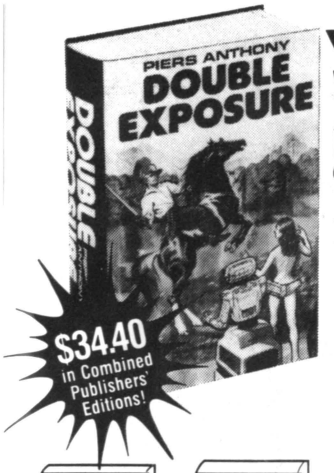
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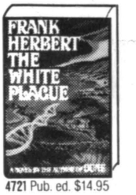
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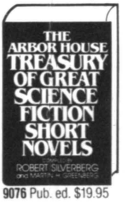
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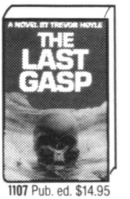
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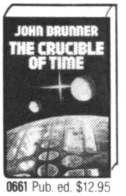
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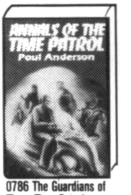
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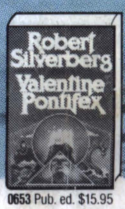
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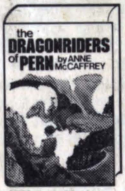
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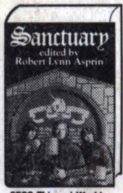
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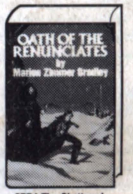
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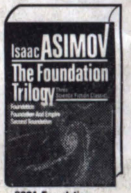
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